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# THE ONE BEFORE



BY  
BARRY  
PAIN

1. *H. swinhoei*



NC..



# **THE ONE BEFORE**



# THE ONE BEFORE

BY

BARRY PAIN F

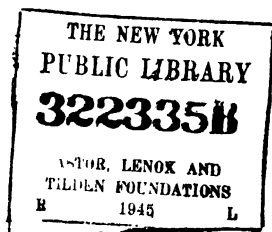
AUTHOR OF "ELIZA," "STORIES IN THE DARK," ETC.

*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BROWNE*

V. C.

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS  
NEW YORK ::::::::::::::: 1902

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**BARRY PAIN**

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# **THE ONE BEFORE**



# THE ONE BEFORE

## CHAPTER I



MR. ERNEST SAUNDERS BARLEY, aged forty-two, a gentleman of independent means, lived with his wife at The Chestnuts, Shalton, Surrey. It was a newish house, with a couple of acres of garden, about a quarter of a mile outside the town.

At ten in the morning, Mr. Barley was generally to be found in his workroom on the first floor. He was a man of many occupations, principally futile. He had no great knowledge of botany, but he had recently taken to pressing flowers and mounting them on sheets of cartridge paper. He spoke of this as his Hortus Siccus, reserved a table for it in the workroom, and thought a good deal of it. Another table was set aside for fretwork, spoken of by Mr. Barley as carving; a dust-cloth was spread under this to save the excessively florid carpet. A third table bore his typewriter; his diary, as well as any letters of length and formality,

## The One Before

were always typed by him. A big cupboard opening into the room had been converted into a photographic dark room. A present from Mr. Barley was extremely likely to take the form of one of his own photographs of part of his own garden, mounted by himself and placed in a fretwork frame of his own construction. He was interested also, more than most men, in household economy; he could, and did, mark glass-cloths and dusters with extreme neatness.

One morning in August he stood in his workroom, surveying through the window the scene in the garden below. He was a thin and narrow-chested man of medium height. He had rather scanty fair hair, a distrustful eye, a prolonged and pointed nose, a thin-lipped and peevish mouth, and somewhat prominent ears. He was clean shaven, and his light flannel suit seemed out of tune with the wearer. Below on a seat in the garden he could see his young guest, James Havern. James was smoking cigarettes and reading the morning papers, as if there were nothing else to do in the world. Barley turned back to his room and prepared for a strenuous morning. As he was taking his coat off, one of the things that he had meant to remember flashed across his mind. At the same time he recognized a step in the passage outside. He opened the door, and said, in a special low vibrant voice which he reserved for servants—

## The One Before

"Jane."

Jane did not hear him.

He did not raise the note, but he increased its length and volume—

"Ja-a-a-ane!"

She heard, and turned back at once—a tall girl,



good-looking, with the impress of immaculate respectability and respectfulness all over her.

"Yes, sir," she said. Her air of pleased deference was alone worth more than her wages.

"Every morning, Jane, a certain amount of—er—chips and small pieces of wood are removed from the dust-cloth under the table where I do my carving. I

## The One Before

wish to know what becomes of them. What is done with them?"

"I cannot say at all, sir. It is Ellen who does this room. Shall I inquire, sir?" Ready delight in meeting the slightest wish of E. S. Barley seemed to radiate from her face.

"Do so," said Mr. Barley, tersely, as he robed himself in a white apron, preparatory to work.

When Jane got downstairs the air of pleased deference wore thin, and the natural girl shone through. Servants do not always call one another by their official names, and Jane addressed Ellen as Maudie.

"Maudie dear, that silly old devil wants to know what you do with the little bits of wood from his room when you do it in the morning?"

"Sew 'em up in a bag and wear 'em next my 'eart. Tell him so, with my love."

"Oh, Maudie, you *are*! Do cheese it. He's waiting to know. Truth he is."

"What's he think I do with 'em? Is he afraid I eat 'em? I throw 'em away with the other rubbish, and I wish I could throw him on the top. Tell him that instead."

"Right. Now I will. You see if I don't. Now you've done for yourself, my girl." Ellen received this assurance with incredulous laughter.

## The One Before

When Jane reached the workroom, the message as actually delivered, with an air of some concern, ran as follows:—

“So far, sir, it seems that the chips have been thrown away. Ellen is very sorry if that was wrong, but she had no special orders about them.”

“I thought as much,” said Mr. Barley, with marked restraint. “For the wood I use for my carving I pay from fourpence to a shilling a foot. You understand? From fourpence to a shilling per foot. For bundles of firewood in the winter I pay—I forget the exact sum, but it mounts up. This must not go on. It is wasteful. In future Ellen must get a large cardboard box and save these—er—chips. They will be useful for lighting the fire with in the winter.”

“Very useful indeed, sir,” said Jane, with conviction. “I am sorry we didn’t think of it before. I will tell Ellen at once, sir.”

And this was the way she told Ellen: “I say, Maudie, here’s the latest. You’re to keep his ’oly blessed chips and use ’em for the fires.”

“Why, certainly,” said Ellen-Maudie, ironically. “I suppose he didn’t ’appen to mention what we’re to do with the orange-peel and the nutshells?”

“Slipped his memory,” said Jane.

“Pity too. They’d do to trim a ’at.” And there was another burst of ironical laughter.

## The One Before

But it was not given to Ernest Saunders Barley to see himself as others saw him. He imagined in times of great self-abasement that there might be a difference between the way people spoke of him and the way they spoke to him, but he never had the slightest idea how great the difference was. Contented with a good work well done, he now began to paste down the pattern on the wood. He was engaged upon this when his wife entered.

She was a kindly woman, whose ordinary common sense was always doing battle with her excessive belief in her husband, and almost always being vanquished. Her fear of him, and her affection for him, and the necessity for humouring and managing him, had made an occasional liar of her. She was some years younger than her husband and still passably pretty.

"I've seen cook, Ernest, and she says the lamb won't do minced for luncheon. Not enough."

"Strange," said Ernest, caressing his chin. "I was thinking as I carved it last night at dinner that it could be made to do very well."

"Yes, Ernest; I saw you were." She was guiltless of irony, and merely wished to agree with him. "You see, when you get it off the bone——"

"Quite so. I'm sure I don't wish to stint anybody. I needn't say that. But all that is wanted is a little management. Tell cook to put the mince on toast,

## The One Before

thick toast. And—well, some poached eggs on the top would make it look more of a dish perhaps. Eggs—I don't know what eggs are this week. They've been very dear lately. Never mind; pay, pay, pay! There's no end to it."

"Are you quite sure, Ernest, that you like to have people staying at the house? Sometimes I think it seems to put you out a little. Of course it does add to expenditure."

Without intending it she had touched him on the raw. She had assailed his character as a host.

"Now, why you should say that, Mary, except to annoy me, I can't think. There is nothing I enjoy more than the exercise of hospitality within reasonable limits. I dislike recklessness; but what has that to do with it? I suppose you wish to imply that I am not a good host?"

"Of course that would be absurd, dear."

"I should be extremely sorry for James, or any other guest of mine, to leave my house with the impression that he had not had enough to eat. The position of a host carries with it its duties. I feel that as a point of honour. It is like the old *noblesse oblige*. Now, with regard to the luncheon, let me think. Yes, we will have the pressed beef on the sideboard. There is no occasion for you to make any allusion to it; but have it there. If he wishes for it, he will mention it.

## The One Before

James is like that. However, he is your brother-in-law's brother, and, after all, he leaves this afternoon; we must be rather more careful after he has gone. I suppose you wish to play tennis with him this morning."

"Well, yes—I think so. There is nothing more for me to do in the house."

"I should not say that. Only ~~this~~ morning I detected a piece of careless waste that a little supervision might have prevented. But I make no objection. It is our duty to entertain our guest—I realize that. Hospitality demands sacrifice. I shall be down myself at half past twelve—half an hour before luncheon, and half an hour taken from my morning, simply on his account. Now, if you stop chattering there I shall never get to work."

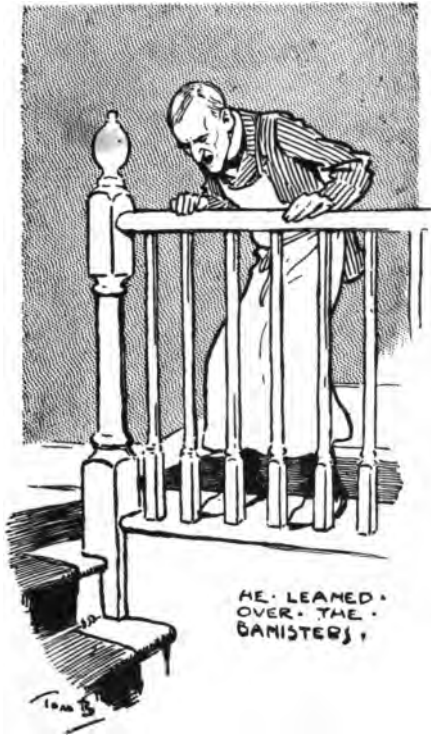
But she had hardly reached the bottom of the stairs before she heard him calling her from the top. He leaned over the banisters.

"I only wished to say it, while I remembered it, that I have left a cutting from a paper on the clock in the dining-room. You might look at it when you have time. It refers to the use of newspapers as blankets and bed-covers. Said to be very warm; but I don't know if there's anything in it."

Returning to his room he fitted a new saw, and began to cut out the pattern on one side of an ornamental

## The One Before

wheelbarrow. In so far as that wheelbarrow could have been of no earthly use to anybody for anything, it may be considered to have been an instance of art for



art's sake. The vineleaf pattern on the side was pretty, and he was pleased with it. It was his habit to sing as he worked. In a subdued husky voice he went

## The One Before

through a repertoire composed of such scraps as he could remember of hymns and sentimental ballads. Plying the fret-saw furiously, he sang—

“ If the night would only last,  
And never the daylight come,  
In a love-dream we would live, while our hearts beat fast,  
And only our lips were dumb.  
All alone, my dusky queen,  
We would live and love unseen  
’Mid the singing of the woodbirds and the——”

Here the saw snapped. Possibly the suggested association of Mr. E. S. Barley and a dusky queen was too much for it. Mr. Barley stood up. He did not swear, but his brows contracted and his eyes closed. He was suffering. When he opened his eyes again they happened to sight the waste-paper basket. He kicked it to the other end of the room, sighed, and sat down to fit another saw. Soon the work was progressing smoothly again, while Mr. Barley huskily intimated that he haply might remember, and haply might forget. The morning had begun badly, and he saw the world very dark. It was a world of reckless waste and pleasure-seeking; he would buy his fret-saws elsewhere in future. His temper was working up for a storm.



MRS.  
E. S.  
BARLEY.

## CHAPTER II

PUNCTUALLY at half-past twelve Mr. Barley approached the tennis-court. His misfit smile showed that he was now in the part of the genial host. Over his shoulder he carried a skipping-rope. The players should, Mr. Barley considered, have flung down their racquets and come to welcome him. But they neither saw nor heard him. The interest of a close finish had transformed them. James Havern, a good-humoured and pleasant-looking young man as a general rule, wore an expression of mad and murderous hate. The tame and submissive Mary was changed into a blood-thirsty leaping tigress. Vantage out. Jimmy, with his white teeth set and breathing hard, delivered a swift and vicious service. The tigress leaped, and the ball came back hard and low to the far corner. Jimmy just reached it, and the rally went on. Two people playing for their lives could not have been more concentrated. At last a well-placed one beat Jimmy, and he returned it into the net. Game to the tigress. At once they resumed the normal expressions of decent and civilized people.

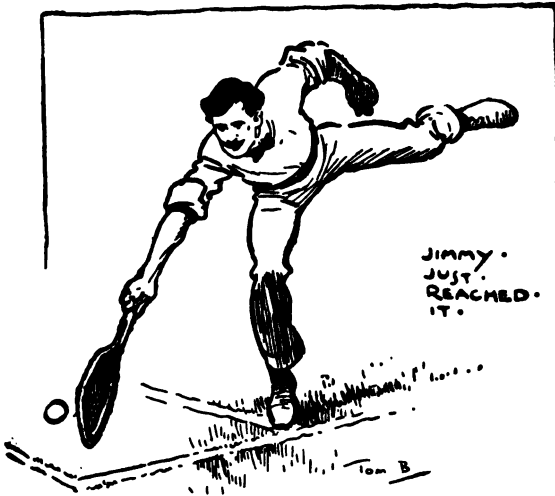
## The One Before

"Good game," said Jimmy.

"Excellent!" cried the genial host, with intent to attract attention to himself.

"You there?" Jimmy called to him. "Shan't be long finishing this sett."

"You don't mind?" added the submissive wife.



He minded very much. It was selfish; and on the part of a young man like James it was disrespectful. Why could they not have abandoned the game and resumed it after luncheon? What did they think he had come out for? However, in the rôle of the genial host, it was necessary to make sacrifices. So Mr. Bar-

## The One Before

ley, with a fine imitation of a careless and cordial manner, said—

“By all means. Finish the game, of course. I can wait.”

He took a garden-chair, and unconsciously assumed the expression of a Christian martyr. The game went on, and a further triumph for the tigress finished the sett. Then, somewhat perfunctorily, they asked Mr. Barley if he wouldn't play. Mr. Barley's tennis was of a childish pat-a-cake order, and they accepted his refusal with equanimity.

“No, thanks,” he said. “I've got rather tired of it, I like to strike out a new line now and again. Now, did you ever try this?” He swung his skipping-rope carelessly.

“Don't know,” said Jimmy. “Expect I did when I was in the nursery.”

“Very much the answer I expected, James. Now, when people laugh at skipping, I generally say, ‘Yes, but can you skip?’ There's a good deal in it. Apart from plain skipping, there are the variations. It is a grand exercise. I generally take a few minutes of it in my dressing-room before my bath in the morning.”

James very properly suppressed a desire to ask if he couldn't have a photograph.

“And,” Mr. Barley continued, “it takes some little skill, especially when you come to the variations. I

## The One Before

don't profess to be anything much at it myself. What do you say? Shall we try a little competition?"

"I don't mind, just for the fun of it. Will you start, Mary?"

"I've tried it. I'm no good. You begin."



At his tenth skip James broke down; Mr. Barley, who had been counting, was delighted.

"Ah! you see there is a little art required for it, after all. Of course, what is essential is a perfect co-ordination of the eye and hand. I will show you where you are wrong, afterwards. In the mean time, I have to beat ten."

## The One Before

He began to skip with great solemnity and precision. At his eighth skip James suddenly screamed out—

“Look behind you!”

Mr. Barley was startled, caught his foot in the rope, and nearly came over. James was much amused.

“My win! What price perfect co-ordination?”

Mr. Barley glared at him in silence for a moment, and then hurled the skipping-rope from him and strode rapidly in the direction of the house. The storm had burst.

Jimmy gave the low whistle which indicates surprise.

“Sorry I annoyed him,” he said. “It hadn’t occurred to me that a grown man could lose his temper over a skipping-rope.”

“I don’t think he’s lost his temper,” said Mary, mendaciously. “I think he just happened to think of something suddenly.”

“Yes,” said Jim, drily; “he thought of something all right. I’m glad he had the delicacy not to say it. I hope for your sake it won’t last long.”

“You’ve got quite a wrong idea of Ernest. He’s one of the best and kindest of men, really. You listen to everything that that wicked old man, Uncle Nathaniel, says; he’s always been prejudiced against Ernest.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t say that—one may like a man all right even when one recognizes his little weaknesses. And uncle’s distinctly fond of you.”

## The One Before

"He needn't talk about weaknesses, with a memory that absolutely cannot be depended upon for a single thing. I think you go there far too much. You came from him to us, and now you are going back to him again. Ernest doesn't think that he's at all a good influence for you. Oh, I must go and see about luncheon."

She ran into the house; Jimmy followed leisurely. She went straight upstairs to the work-room, and found the door locked. Within the room Ernest Saunders Barley, that best and kindest of men, was lying on his back on the sofa, with his handkerchief over his face. He repeated in a bitter and determined whisper—

"Swindler and blackguard! Swindler and blackguard! Dirty swindler! Swindler and blackguard!" He chastised the sofa cushions without mercy.

A gentle tap at the door caused him to stop suddenly. "Who's there?" he asked, in the sepulchral voice of imperfect resignation.

"It's me, dear," said Mary. "Aren't you coming down to lunch?"

"No; I have a headache."

"I'm so sorry. What shall I have sent up to you?"

"Nothing. I couldn't eat anything."

"Ernest, James says he's sorry if he annoyed you by his silliness."

"I was not in the least annoyed or surprised either."

## The One Before

That has nothing to do with it. I went away because it seemed impossible to get him to play fairly. It was of no consequence to me in the least."

"You'll see him before he goes?"

"If I am well enough. In the mean time, I wish to be left alone, please."

The storm had given place to a deep depression. He took a half-sheet of note-paper from the fret-worked tray in which he kept such treasures, and wrote on it as follows:—

*"No noise of any kind in this passage please.—E. S. B."*

He opened the door to affix this notice outside, and a slight smell of luncheon greeted him. It was not unpleasant. It was even appetizing. Should he? Headaches might, and frequently did, pass away very suddenly. No, it would be absurd. He fixed his notice, locked his door again, and returned to the sofa. His absence would mean one unclaimed poached egg; probably James would have it. Eggs were dear. What was that riddle about them. If an egg and a half cost three half-pence, how many herrings—— And here Mr. Barley fell asleep.

He awoke at two with an undeniable hunger. Beyond the need for posing as an interesting invalid was the need for luncheon. Why not? Voices in the garden showed him that Mary and James had finished luncheon and were safely out of the way. The ser-

## The One Before

vants would be occupied with their own dinner, and had probably not cleared the luncheon-table yet. It was

HE FIXED  
HIS NOTICE

10m 3



reasonably likely that he would be undiscovered. He opened his door and listened. There was not a sound in the house. No one was about. He removed the

## The One Before

notice from the door, crumpled it up, and threw it into the waste-paper basket. Then, on tip-toe, he went along the passage and down the stairs. He felt adventurous and rather good. There was no one in the dining-room and—Oh, joy!—the pressed beef was still on the sideboard. Its proportions told Mr. Barley's practised eye that James had been at it—in spite of that extra poached egg; but even this could not entirely damp his satisfaction. His place was laid for him at the table. This was very much all right.



### CHAPTER III

MR. BARLEY carved for himself with an unusual liberality. He also poured out for himself a glass of claret. He sat down to the table and was contented. Reaction had set in, and he was for the moment convinced that all was for the best in the best of worlds. But almost with his first mouthful the trouble began. He heard a step coming down the path which he could not mistake; it was Mary's step. And he was not anxious that Mary, or anybody else, should have a doubt of that headache and total loss of appetite. When she came past the window she would certainly see him. There was only one thing to be done—to get below the level of the table, so that the friendly cloth screened him from sight. With wonderful rapidity he changed his seat from the chair to the floor beside it, taking his plate and glass with him. He was now invisible from the window. The table, like a protecting rampart, rose between him and it. He rested his plate on the seat of the chair, and went on with his luncheon.

Mary—he felt this as a legitimate personal grievance

## The One Before

against her—lingered some time at the window. Why should she? It was tactless. It was keeping him in a position that could not be considered dignified. He was just deciding that this was really too bad when worse befell him. He heard a well-known whistle coming down the passage. That was James,



and considering all that James had had for luncheon he might have had the decency to keep out of the dining-room. The interesting invalid was even more anxious that James should not catch him in the act of a hearty luncheon. But what was he to do? If he arose, he then became visible to Mary at the window. If he remained as he was James would see him as soon as he

## The One Before

entered the room. There was again only one thing to be done—to crawl under the table and hope that James would not stay long. To that twilight seclusion he at once retired, still taking his plate and glass with him. They constituted evidence. If they were found, he might just as well be found himself. James wandered about the room in an undecided sort of way. Presently he said, in a low distinct voice—

“ Oh, where’s that cigarette case ! ”

“ Found it ? ” called Mary through the window.

“ Not yet,” said Jimmy ; “ but I’m quite certain I left it here. I shall have it in a moment. I wonder if you’d mind tightening that net a little ? I shall be there by the time that you’ve finished.”

Mary moved on. Ernest Saunders Barley, in his position under the table, felt distinctly uneasy. Suppose that James took it into his head to think that his cigarette case had fallen on the floor and looked under the table. Soon, however, immunity gave him confidence. He began to experiment on a method for the noiseless consumption of pressed beef. It was entirely successful, so far as the beef was concerned ; the fact that he knocked his wine-glass over on to his plate was extraneous to the experiment. But it made enough noise to arouse the curiosity of James.

Now, when you find your host sitting under the dining-room table, in a cramped position, nursing a

## The One Before

plate which contains an injudicious mixture of pressed beef, claret, broken glass, and mustard, you may be pardoned for coming to the conclusion that the strain has been a little too much for him.

"What on earth's up!" Jimmy exclaimed.

"It's all right," said Mr. Barley, with limp hilarity.



"I was just going to have a little joke with you. If you wouldn't mind taking this plate, I'll get out."

Jimmy put the plate down on the table. "I see. And is this—er—mixture part of the joke?"

"No, I had an accident with my glass. Unfortunate. It's spoilt the whole thing. Would you mind ringing? The fact is that my headache passed off suddenly, the way these things will, and I thought the best thing I could do would be to get a little luncheon. Then I heard you coming, and I thought it would be

## The One Before

good fun to get under the table and then jump out at you. These jests don't always come out right, you see."

"Yes," said James, reflectively. "Talking of things coming out, there's a good deal of claret on the carpet under the table. Ah! here's my case that I was looking for. Well, I'll see you later. I'm just going to play one final sett with Mary."

On his way to the tennis-court he thought it over. The notion that Mr. Barley had ever intended to perpetrate a joke was too monstrous for consideration. Besides, if he had intended to jump out, why on earth had he not done it?

"I almost think," said Mary, "that I ought to go and see how poor Ernest is before we begin. He may be suffering still. Perhaps I could persuade him to take something."

"His headache is better. I found him under the table in the dining-room. He was sitting up and taking nourishment. He said that he had gone there in order to jump out at me for the joke of the thing."

"Really? You're sure he's all right? It's so unlike him."

"Oh yes. It's not like him, and he's broken a wine-glass in his little frolic; but he's quite all right. I expect he'll be out here directly."

## The One Before

Mary's eye fell on the skipping-rope that Ernest had hurled from him in his rage.

"Then," she said, "I think I'll just put this out of the way." She interpreted Jimmy's inquiring look. "You see," she added, "he doesn't like things to be left about."

Only his sense of his position, and—still more, perhaps—his regard for Mary, stayed Jimmy from interpestive laughter.

By the time that the sett was finished, with another victory for the tigress, Mr. Barley had appeared on the lawn. Apart from a further increase in his disapproval of Jimmy, he was now normal.

"I don't want to interfere in any way with your plans for the afternoon," he said to his wife, "but there are several matters connected with the house that require your attention." He turned to Jimmy, who was now wearing a grin that Mr. Barley disliked extremely: "I don't interrupt your game at all, I hope?"

"Not at all, thanks. We'd finished. The fact is that I thought I'd just run up and say good-bye to the Derrifords."

"You went to say good-bye to them yesterday," said Mary.

"No; I went to see if I could get a round at golf yesterday, only the old man was out."

"But you were there for hours."

## The One Before

"Yes; Mrs. Derriford was at home."

"And Hilda, by any chance?"

"Let me see. Yes; she happened to come in."

The assumption of carelessness in giving this answer was not convincing, and Mary smiled knowingly as she gave him her messages for Mrs. Derriford.

"And now," said Mr. Barley, when his guest had gone, "I will thank you to come and see the way in which the so-called polishing of my brown boots is being conducted at present."

"All right, Ernest," said Mary, meekly. "I'm sorry if they aren't right."

"Nothing is likely to be right where the servants have no proper supervision. Another thing: for the second time this week I've found your storeroom unlocked. I will not have it. It seems to me that you think about nothing but this stupid tennis. That's not all. On going into the storeroom, I found no labels on two of the tins. If there's one thing I hate it's disorder. There's no excuse for it. I am always ready and willing to type neatly for you any label that you may require. You have only to affix them. Apparently, even that is too much trouble. I don't wish to speak sharply, but—well, there are some things that must not be."

"Of course. I'm sorry."

They had reached the house. "Now, please go to

## The One Before

the storeroom at once, and ascertain what the contents of those two tins are. Then come up to my workroom and I will type the labels for you."

He went upstairs, took the cover off his type-writer, put in a sheet of paper, drew up his chair and sat down. Mary entered.

"I'm ready. What is in the first tin?" he asked.

"It's empty. They're both empty."

Mr. Barley replaced the cover on his type-writer with some violence.

"And now," he said, "with reference to those boots."

James returned from his call on the Derrifords in excellent spirits, and just in time to catch the up train. He thanked Mary heartily, and hoped that she would let him come again one of these days. Mary said, "Of course." Mr. Barley, with an unnatural smile, shook him by the hand and wished him a pleasant journey.

When the cab had driven off, Mr. Barley turned to his wife.

"I think that I have played my part sufficiently well."

"I don't quite see what you mean, Ernest."

"I mean that I have done my duty as a host, however distasteful it might be. And I may tell you now that that young man will never darken these doors again. My appearance of geniality may have deceived

## The One Before

him and you. It was intended to do so. I dislike him and I disapprove of him, and I've done with him, altogether."

"Oh, Ernest! Why?"

"I am sorry to have to say it of a man who is a connection of yours by marriage, but he is a man of no



character—prying, dishonourable, and unprincipled. Formerly I was deceived in him. Now I have found him out."

"You aren't thinking about that skipping-match still, are you?"

"That and other things. Trifles are often important as indications of character."

"He only did it for fun, you know."

"I'm glad you can accept that explanation. I cannot. Then there are these visits to Mr. Nathaniel Brookes."

"But Mr. Brookes is his uncle."

## The One Before

"That may be. But I know something of Mr. Brookes. He is not a good influence for any man. It is to him that I trace James's downfall. It's over. Never again—never again." And, with these fateful words on his lips, Mr. Barley strode off to play the fool with his Hortus Siccus.

Jimmy calmly slept in the express to London, without any idea that he had had a downfall, and that sentence of banishment had been pronounced upon him. He would have been sorry to hear that he was not to visit Shalton again. And yet he did not go there for the beautiful eyes of Mr. Barley, nor for tennis with Mary, though he was very fond of her, nor for golf with old Mr. Derriford. At any rate, these did not constitute his principal reason.



## CHAPTER IV

PUNCTUALLY at ten o'clock, by the rule of the house, the nice-looking parlour-maid Jane, and her intimate friend Ellen, surnamed Maudie, went up to their room. It was supposed that they went to bed at once, and that the gas in their room was put out at half-past ten. But their practice did not always correspond with this hypothesis.

Having made a fair division of one pennyworth of pine-apple drops, Jane kicked off her shoes and stretched herself on her bed. Ellen took up a similar position on the other bed.

"I must, and will have the gas put out by half-past ten," said Jane, giving a passable imitation of E. S. Barley.

"That's all right" said Maudie. "I'll undress when I like. No sooner nor no later. And if he don't like it he can leave it."

"It ain't a bad plice," said Jane. "He's near, of course. But he knows where to stop if he wants them that understand good service."

"That's where he's so rum," said Maudie. "He's

## The One Before

a perfect fool, and yet he ain't, you know. You see what I mean."

"He's like no gentleman as ever I come across.



Yet there's the money. What are you to say? He wants a good taking up and setting down. But—bless yer!—she'll never do it."

"You don't need to tell me that."

## The One Before

"There was something up to-day, if you arst my opinion. If he went off his head sudden, it wouldn't never surprise me."

"Well, I never noticed nothing."

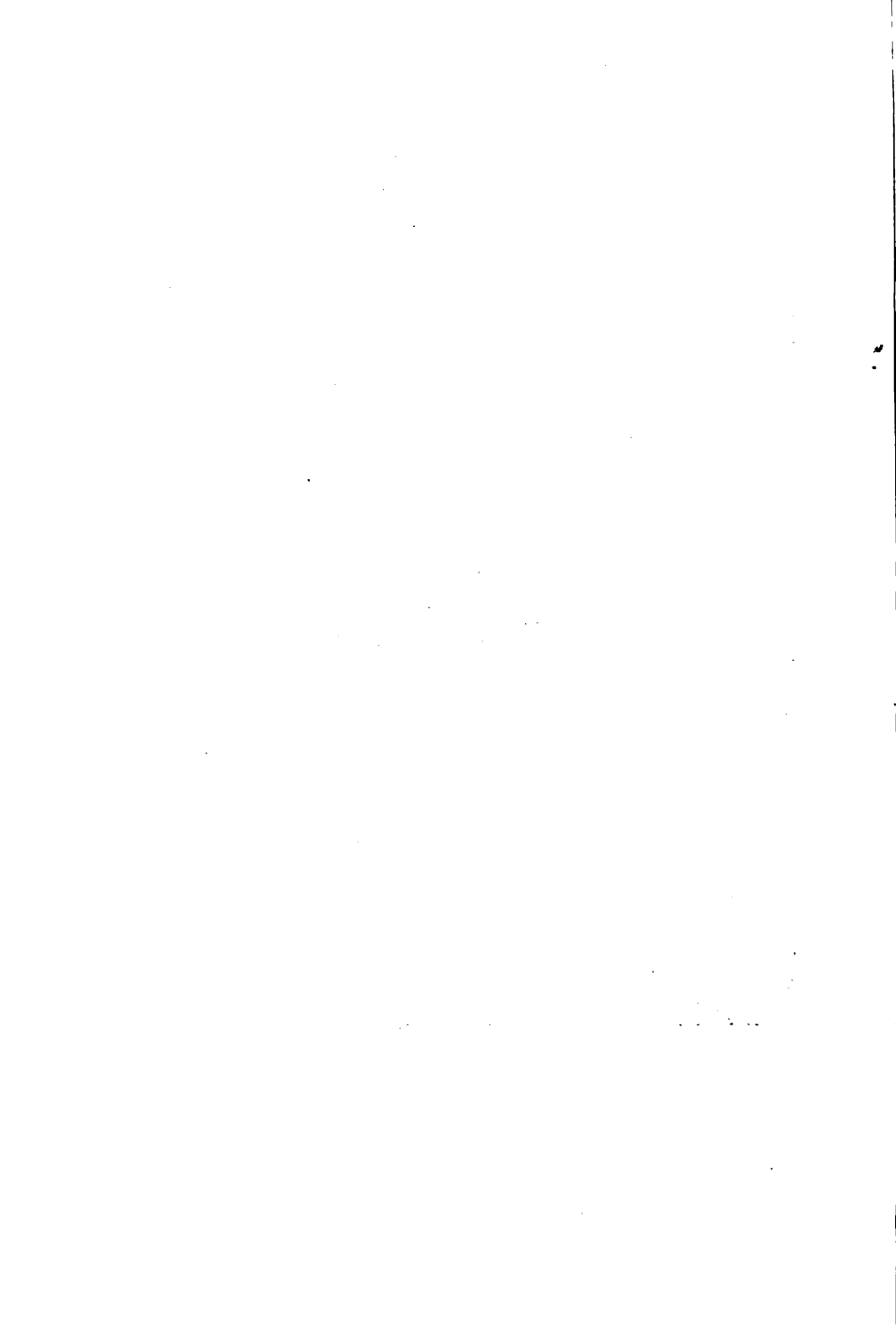
"Didn't you? But I did. He never come in to lunch, and I could see as she were upset. Mr. 'Avern seemed as usual. Now, that's a young gentleman that is a gentleman. And it ain't only that he's free with his money; it's his way as I like. Nice-looking, too—reminds me of George, in some things."

"Oh, you and your George! But what 'appened?"

"Nothing much, except to them as can put one thing and another together. I happened to go down the passage, past what he calls his workroom. There was a notice on the door as there were to be no noise in the passage. Now, there never is no noise in that passage nohow; who's to make it? I went on down, and next moment he was down, too, and in the dining-room. He was there some time; I won't say how long, for I didn't happen to cast my eye on the clock, but it was a good time. Then, he rung just as we were finishing our dinners. You were off, it being your afternoon, but me and Mrs. Dawes was still at it. I found him with a plate of the beef, and a glass smashed over it, and the wine all in the plate. 'Take this away, and bring a clean plate,' he says. So I did. So far it might just have been a mischance, and I shouldn't have

"TAKE · THIS · AWAY · AND · BRING · A ·  
CLEAN · PLATE ·"





## The One Before

thought no more about it. But, then, he says to me: 'Some claret has been spilled on the floor, too, under the table. See about it.' So I did again. That had been just done, and it were right in the middle. It couldn't have been done, except by somebody sitting under the table. Now, I'm one to put things together. I thinks of that, and of his not coming to lunch, though there's company, and the way as she wasn't herself, and the notice on that door, and all. It looks to me as if he were touched."

"Don't you," said the sensitive Ellen-Maudie. "You fair give me the shivers. We might be all murdered in our beds!"

"But, then, you have the opposite. He were just the same as he always is at dinner, though speaking of Mr. 'Avern in a way as I shouldn't care to be spoken of. All I say about it is that there's something up. It may be as you think, or it may not. Maudie, there's his step coming down the passage. Put the gas as low as it will go."

Mr. Barley frequently came down the passage to see if he could detect a light under the door of either of the servants' rooms, and Maudie was not perturbed. On the contrary, it seemed an indication that Mr. Barley had not yet lost his characteristics. The steps lingered for a moment or two outside the door, and then moved off again. Maudie put up the gas.

## The One Before

"He's his old sweet self still," said Jane.

"Ah!" said Maudie. "When he's mad enough not to be particular about half a farthing's worth of gas, he'll be pretty mad, and no error. That always makes me just as angry as if it was the first time. If we were late in the morning, then I wouldn't say. But rules, just for the sake of rules, is what I never could stand. Oh, he's a beauty!"

"Anyhow, I ain't got much more of it. It'll be Christmas, George thinks."

"How you can—and with the examples as you've got in this house, too! Look at Mrs. Dawes."

"Well, her husband don't trouble her much."

"No; but just look at it. And all because there was no watercress. 'Good-bye,' says he, 'I'm off.' 'Where to?' says she. 'Egyp,' says he. And from that day to this she's never set eyes on him. She's told me the story many a time. Where'd she have been if it hadn't happened that she were a good cook? Then there's Mrs. Barley. She has all the comforts; but look at the life he leads her. He's forever interfering and poking his nose into what don't concern him. She daren't call her soul her own. She spends all her time trying to keep his temper smooth. I remember once, when he was away, I was doing her room, and I come on a letter from him. Not knowing what it was, I just glanced through the first two pages. It were

## The One Before

nothing but blowing her up because she hadn't had the chimney of his blessed workroom swept, saying she had no initiative, and a lot of beastly things like that. Then, seeing it were a private letter, of course I put it down. I dare say the rest was no better. No; with warnings all around me, I choose to keep my independence."

"You do talk such socialism. What are women meant for if it ain't to marry? I call it wicked the way you go on about marriage. What's the Bible say?"

"It don't say you've got to marry whether you like it or not. Anyhow, you're warned."

"Why, you talk as if my George were like that old idiot. George is a very different sort."

"He is now. I dare say as Mr. Barley were civil enough when he was courting. It's afterwards the misery begins. None for me, thank you."

"Anyhow, I'm not like her. I have got a little spirit of my own. You wouldn't catch me almost arsting to be trampled on, like she do. But you know, Maudie, I don't take much notice of what you say. One of these days love will awike in your heart."

"Then it'll get put to sleep again."

"That ain't so easy done," said Jane, sentimentally. "It's like—well, I can't tell you. It's like nothing else. It comes over you in a wave, and there you are."

## The One Before

One of these day, as I tell you, you'll know it, and then you'll think very different."

"When I do, I'll write and tell you," said Maudie, with a yawn, rising from her recumbent position.



"Talking about courting, I had a word with Mr. 'Icks, the Derrifords' gardener, on Sunday; and from what he tells me, I think I know what brings Mr. 'Avern to Shalton."

"I'd guessed that myself. I wonder what Miss Hilda thinks about it. She's one of the disdainful

## The One Before

ones. She don't need anybody to tell her she's a beauty. She's found that out for herself. So you saw Mr. 'Icks again on Sunday? Poor Mr. 'Icks!"

"What's the matter with him?"

"As if you didn't know."

"Well, I ain't going to marry Mr. 'Icks. That's flat. And he's been told so once for all. Let him find some other girl, like yourself, as don't mind giving up her independence. Now, 'old your row, my dear, for half a moment; I'm going to say my prayers."

Ellen-Maudie dropped on her knees. Jane, with a pensive and abstracted expression, began to wind the cheap American alarum.



## CHAPTER V

MR. NATHANIEL BROOKES was a gentleman of commanding presence. He had thick white hair and an ivory skin. His face was remarkably mobile, and his eyes remarkably bright. Though he had the sweetest of tempers, he inspired instant respect in strangers who met him, and it was not only because he was on the committee that the club waiters were so specially attentive to him. In his younger days, abandoning the bar as soon as his profession threatened to become lucrative and tiresome, he travelled much and curiously, and had seen many strange things. He had several times been in imminent danger of being murdered, but never, he was wont to say, in the slightest danger of being married. At any rate, he had always remained a bachelor. His memory was immense; all his life the bright eyes had been noting, and the capacious head had been storing; he asserted that, to the best of his belief, he had never forgotten anything. But the memory had a drawback in that it was by no means always available; he could not always recall

## The One Before

things when he wanted them. There were the facts in the store-house, but the door was temporarily locked. He was capable of forgetting—or, at least, of being for a while unable to recall—his own name. On such occasions his secretary or his valet would act as a handy book of reference. But everything that he temporarily forgot ultimately came back to him. Sometimes the interval was long. For instance, once in telling a story he forgot the name of the man who had interested him so much in Port Said, and finished his story without it; six years afterwards he recalled the name. It was Smith! Mary, as has been seen, regarded this curious memory as an affliction; so did many others; it is probable that Mr. Brookes himself was secretly rather proud of it. For the rest, he was a somewhat complicated mixture of the dreamer and the man of the world.

“It’s no good your saying anything, Jimmy,” said Uncle Nathaniel, as he finished soup on the evening of Jimmy’s arrival. “Mary doesn’t approve of me. Our beliefs are not identical, and we’ve got differently coloured hair. Besides, she loves Ernest Saunders Barley, and I don’t even like him. That explains itself. Even if she wanted to approve of me, that ridiculous little squirt wouldn’t let her. Never mind; she’s a very good sort. I can’t speak as to her tennis, about which you’re so enthusiastic; but she’s a kindly person, and looks nice, and is generally sensible—always, in

## The One Before

fact, except where Ernest Saunders is concerned. By the way, let's abuse Ernest Saunders."

"But I've just come from accepting his hospitality."

"Anybody could see that; you've lost weight. What's the abuse matter? It's all in the family. I'm your uncle, and your brother Percy's wife's younger sister married Barley. It's not as if you were speaking to a stranger. Tell me, has he got a fretwork paper-knife in his bathroom yet?"

"No," said Jimmy, laughing.

"You surprise me. When I was stopping at Lynthwaite years ago, when you were in Paris, Ernest and his wife were there. He made seven fretwork paper-knives there and then—each one more filthy and useless than the last. He used to take them round for everybody to admire. I asked him what he was going to do with them; I thought they must be for a bazaar; they were the kind of thing you never see anywhere else. He said he should find them very handy about his house. Why, there must be a fretwork paper-knife in the bathroom by now; it is very nice of you to pretend there's not, but there is, of course. He's a baby, you know—a mean baby—always has been."

"You knew him before his marriage, didn't you?"

"I'd met him once or twice. I know all about him. He had three thousand a year on his father's death;

## The One Before

papa Barley made it in soap. He's never spent it. I doubt if he's ever spent a third of it. But his house is a kind of fetish with him; when he does spend a few pennies it's mostly on the house. What a curse that man's dinner must be to him—naturally rather greedy, and naturally very economical! Dinner? Why, it's a civil war. Even in those days his favourite reading was the store catalogues, and he knew more about the details of household management than I consider decent in any man. I once saw him tell a story; it appeared to be a dramatic and impressive kind of story. He raised his voice when he came to the triumphant point, and I caught the words: 'The same bacon—absolutely the same bacon and a halfpenny a pound cheaper!' That's Ernest Saunders Barley. I believe his notion of heaven is that it's a place where you get the same bacon a halfpenny a pound cheaper. He's always been like that."

"It was Percy's idea, and it's mine too," said Jimmy, "that he's got worse these last few years."

"What? Has he taken to drink? I'm glad to hear it. It was always my complaint against him that he had no vices."

"No, he's not taken to drink, but—well, I can't think how Mary manages to live with him. It's pretty serious. It's a good deal her own fault too. She spoils him. When he behaves like a sulky child, and

## The One Before

ought to be rotted most unmercifully, she apologizes, and tries to smooth him down, and kow-tows generally. The house-fetish is worse than ever, too. He considers that every moment is wasted when she's not actively engaged in housekeeping. He brings her in from tennis because there are a 'few matters in the house' that he wants her to see about. He is always giving her orders and directions. I'll do him the justice to say that he tries not to be rude to her; but when he's lost his wool he doesn't always succeed. But I haven't begun to tell you half about him. He's taken to pressing wild-flowers and to playing with the skipping-rope. I happened to humbug him yesterday when he was skipping, and he hurled the rope away, stalked into the house, and refused to come down to lunch. He's a double-dyed ass, and a little tin domestic tyrant."

"You're quite right not to abuse him, Jimmy."

"I didn't mean to. I only meant to tell you the facts. But it's not so easy to stop when you once begin talking about the beggar. What I wanted was to ask you whether, for Mary's sake, something couldn't be done. She doesn't complain, of course; but she must be having a pretty bad time. Percy and Jennie think so. Couldn't some one tell him what an ass he is?"

"Undoubtedly; but he wouldn't believe it. No; of course he ought to have been sent to a public school



MR JOHNSON .



## The One Before

and a university, and then sent round the world. By that time a lot of the nonsense would have been knocked out of him. Now, I don't suppose anybody could alter him, except Mary—and she won't."

"It couldn't be suggested to her? Suppose Jennie, for instance, were to——"

"I shouldn't advise it. It's been said that it's dangerous to monkey with a buzz-saw. Well, monkeying with a buzz-saw is a pleasant and harmless occupation for children compared with interfering between a wife and her husband. I've been told that I can't know anything about women because I never married; but I'm sure of that, at any rate. No. Extract the comedy from the situation, and then leave it. You can't mend it."

The conversation passed to other subjects. The two men were dining in Uncle Nathaniel's flat in Kensington. As a rule Mr. Brookes took his nephew to dine at the club, but the club was closed for cleaning, and Mr. Brookes disliked the hospitality offered to its members elsewhere. It was a comfortable flat; Mr. Brookes considered that he had done enough roughing it, and that his years required comfort. It was not artistic in the Regent Street sense, and perhaps it was a little too full of mementos of Mr. Brookes's foreign travels. The small dining-room opened into a larger library, where Mr. Brookes, with the assistance of Mr.

## The One Before

Johnson, his secretary, was wont to devote a part of his day to the composition of a work to be entitled "Travels in Strange Places." The work progressed slowly, and Mr. Brookes was wont to complain that Johnson, a pimply and anæmic young man, with ambitions towards an university degree, cut out everything that was really interesting.

Over their coffee in the library Jimmy suddenly observed—

"By the way, uncle, I came on an old friend of yours at Shalton. Do you remember a fine old chap called Derriford?"

"Johnnie Derriford? Why, of course I do. Met him at Cairo, I'm afraid to say how many years ago. He wasn't so very old then. He'd no qualifications for travelling except a pot of money, the English language, a good temper, and the gall of a canal horse. Yes, he was never afraid of asking for what he wanted; and he got along very well too. Remember Derriford? I should think I do. Why, it was only this morning that Johnson cut out my account of a little—er—exploit that Johnnie and I had together. Ah, the place was very different then from what it is now. He'd got his wife with him, a jolly little woman, and two kids—the prettiest little girls I ever saw in my life. I didn't come back to England for years after that, and so lost sight of them. How are they all?"

## The One Before

"They're all well. The old man's as hard as nails—practically lives in the open air. I used to play golf with him, and on the days when he's in form he takes a deal of beating. His wife is rather a pal of Mary's."



"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH HER?"

"And the girls? It's a queer thing that these pretty children nearly always make ugly women."

"That rule's broken down in their case."

"Oh? And which is the prettiest? Johnson would be down on me for saying that, by the way."

"The younger, Miss Hilda Derriford. But the other, Agnes Derriford, is very pretty too. She's to be married shortly, to Sir Charles Hyrley's eldest son."

"Good. And is Hilda engaged?"

"No," said Jimmy, moodily, as he lit his cigarette. "Nor likely to be."

"Why not?" asked Uncle Nathaniel. "What's the matter with her?"

## The One Before

Jimmy surveyed his uncle with a look of pity. "Well, of course you don't know her. She won't be engaged, solely because I don't see how any man is to have the cheek to ask her. She's too good for men, and she knows it. Nobody could be kinder and gentler up to a point—beyond that an icicle."

"Now, where," said Mr. Brookes, thoughtfully, "have I heard something of that kind before? No matter. So you don't think of trying anything in the nature of a thaw."

"Me!" exclaimed Jimmy. "There are fifty better men than I am that want to marry her, and she won't look at any of them."

"This," said Mr. Brookes, still meditative, "throws a certain side-light on your sudden rush off into Surrey, when you might just as well have stopped here until we go North together next week. In the mean time, I'll take you to see a ballet, I think. It's too late for any of the theatres. And don't forget to tell Ernest Saunders Barley, because it will horrify him. If I can get the reputation of a debauchee by a visit to a County-Council-inspected music-hall, with both its eyes on its licence, then let me have it. I never could resist these cheap bargains."

Suddenly, while Tarver, Mr. Brookes's man, was helping them on with their coats, Mr. Brookes exclaimed—

## The One Before

"Jimmy, I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"Got the very thing to redeem Ernest Saunders Barley. What he wants is, The One Before."



"And what on earth's The One Before," asked Jimmy.

"Why, it's——" Mr. Brookes stopped short, and put one hand to his forehead. "Dear me!" he exclaimed. He turned to Tarver. "Did I ever happen to mention to you, Tarver, something that I called The One Before?"

"I believe not, sir," said Tarver, gravely. "I have no recollection of it."

"Then it's no good, Jimmy, until I remember it. It will come back; but for the present it's not available. Hansom's there, Tarver? That's right."

## CHAPTER VI



As they sat in the library on their return from the music-hall, which had soon bored them, Mr. Brookes became rather interesting on the subject of dancing. Dancing was the primary expression of emotion and the rudiment of the drama; it was also one of the foundations of religion. He spoke of the processional dances of the natives of New Britain, of the "Powder Play" of the Moors, of the "Potlach" of the Alaskan Indians, and wildest and weirdest of all—the Fire Dance, the Hosh-Kon of the Navahoes. He was speaking of the religious dance as still extant in civilized countries and citing the cathedral of Seville, when he stopped suddenly. He had been pacing to and fro. He now sat down, and began to fill his capacious meer-schaum. He wore a gratified expression.

"Seville," he continued. "That gives me it. Now I recall all about The One Before. It is the name of a ring, of gold and bronze, now in my possession, which was given me on his deathbed in Seville by my friend Marcel Desormeaux."

## The One Before

"Who was he?" asked Jimmy, as he removed the wire from a bottle of seltzer water.

"That was not his real name—he told me so. Nor was he a Frenchman. But what his name and nationality were I never knew. I supposed him to be a Russian; but it was only guess-work. He did not speak about his private affairs, and of course I did not question him. He could master a language or dialect more quickly, and could get into sympathy with the natives' point of view more quickly, than any other traveller that I have ever met. He was rather a taciturn beggar. But he was a good sportsman, absolutely without fear, and never forgot a service that had been done to him—or an injury either."

"But this ring—you said it was to work a reformation in our friend Ernest. I don't think I quite tumble to it."

"You will in a moment. I will read you the description of the ring as it appears in my book of travels. Johnson, with his usual beastly discretion, has cut a lot out, but it will give you an idea. It is a ring which possesses magical properties—undoubtedly, for I happen to have tested it myself."

He went to a writing-table, and produced a stack of type-written paper.

"I must say," he observed, as he turned over the pages, "that Johnson is the tidiest little creature that's

## The One Before

ever been reared in captivity. I always know where all my papers are since I've had him. Let me see—here we are.”

He began to read, with parenthetical comments.



“I may as well begin here. ‘In handing me the ring my friend was careful to repeat to me again the strange properties that it possessed, and to exhort me to use it, if at all, with extreme discretion. The circumstances under which it had come into his keeping were sufficiently curious, but need not be detailed here.’ (That last part is Johnson’s, of course; he said that Desormeaux might have some relations living who wouldn’t like it. Careful chap, Johnson. But however.) ‘The ring, which is of antique workmanship, is fashioned in gold and bronze. It bears on a tablet in Persian characters the inscription Sahib-i-dîrîna,

## The One Before

which may be roughly rendered The One Before. It possesses, as I have established by experiment, the power of transferring personality.’ ”

“ Power of which? ” said Jimmy.

“ That’s just Johnson’s stately way of putting it. You’ll catch on directly. I’ll go on. ‘ The wearer acquires the character and temperament of the person who last wore it.’ (See? If you wore it, and then I wore it, I should become like you.) ‘ The rapidity and completeness of the acquisition may vary in different cases. The new character may be acquired instantly, or it may be a slow process extending over years; it may be acquired fully or only partially. The removal of the ring at night or for similar short periods does not affect the transfer, except perhaps to retard it slightly.’ (I wrote, ‘ to slightly retard it,’ but Johnson’s death on split infinitives.) ‘ But when the use of the ring is discontinued altogether the acquired character disappears—here again with varying rapidity in different cases. It is always the original character and never the acquired which is transferred.’ ”

“ Let’s see,” said Jimmy. “ How does that last work out? ”

“ Why, this way. If I wear the ring after you, and so become like you, and then hand the ring on to Johnson and he wears it, he doesn’t become like you in his turn; but he becomes like what I was before I put on

## The One Before

the ring. He gets my original character, and not what I've become through wearing the ring."

"Here's another point. You wear the ring after me, and, in consequence, become like me. You take it off at night, and put it on again next morning. Then the last wearer is not me, but you. Therefore, you ought to become yourself again."

"No. The ring never returns a man to his original character. Johnson points that out when he says that the removal of the ring for short periods does not affect the transfer. I'll read on a bit. 'I am well aware that these statements will be received with incredulity. But I have already established the truth of them to my own satisfaction by a series of experiments. I have seen the nature of one man transferred to another in a way which seemed miraculous.' (Do remind me to tell you about the bishop afterwards. Johnson thought it was better not to put it in the book.) 'And it is possible that at a later date I may take steps which will put the marvellous qualities of the ring beyond the possibility of dispute, though, for some years past, my experiments have been, for personal reasons, abandoned. In the mean time, I attempt no explanation. Every traveller in the strange places of the East comes on problems with which the science of our boasted civilization is simply unable to cope. The treasure-house is broken down, and much of the old

## The One Before

wisdom of the East is lost; but now and again some token comes to light to show——’ Oh, this last part is all pure Johnson. I needn’t read that. What do you make of it?”

“Seems rum—about the rummiest thing I ever heard. And you seriously believe in it, uncle?”

“How can I help myself? I’ve tried it often, and I must believe the evidence of my senses if I am to believe anything. It was not I alone who noted the marked change in the natures of those who tried The One Before. Friends and relations noticed it, and thought it inexplicable—for at that time I never spoke of the mysterious power of the ring to anybody.”

“What was that about the bishop?”

“That was most unfortunate. He was a Colonial bishop, stopping in London. You won’t mind if I don’t give you his name. He was not a bad sort, but he was bumptious. He was bragging to me that he had not got one single superstition. He had already annoyed me by doubting perfectly true stories of mine. I suggested to him that in that case he perhaps would not mind wearing for a few days a ring that I had which was supposed to have extraordinary powers. He laughed at me, and put the ring on, as he said, to give me a lesson. For the moment it had slipped my memory, but the last person to wear that ring had been a hardened and irreclaimable gambler. He was a good

## The One Before

fellow in many ways, and I had had hopes that, by means of the ring, I might break the spell, and give him a chance of reclaiming himself. In this I was fairly successful; but I should, of course, have remembered



HE WAS  
ATTRACTING  
A GOOD  
DEAL OF  
ATTENTION.

that the next person to wear the ring would inevitably inherit the temperament of an habitual gambler. I never thought about it. Two days afterwards I was going to the Derby; I was going by rail to meet friends there. On Victoria platform I met my friend the

## The One Before

bishop. He was in his usual clothes; but he had got a bundle of sporting papers under his arm, and his field-glasses, in a yellow leather case, were slung over his shoulder; he was attracting a good deal of attention. He saw me, and came up to me at once. He said that we could travel down together; he had got a good thing, and was ready to bet his last gaiter on it. It was a long while since he had done anything of the kind; but he would soon pick it up, and he was going to have a jolly good time. Really, it was most embarrassing. I said it would be delightful, and, by the way, would he mind giving me back that quaint Persian ring that I had lent him? Not a bit of it. The ring was a mascot, and he was not going to spoil his luck. The only thing to do was to appeal to his gambling instinct. I said the ring was no mascot, and I could very soon prove that by tossing him for it. 'Done with you,' he said. 'Best out of three. Come along to the refreshment room.' The place was full, and everybody was staring at him; but he didn't care. He ordered a brandy and soda, chaffed me because I wouldn't have any, and pulled a half-crown out of his pocket, and wanted to pitch it up there and then. I explained to him that it would have to be done surreptitiously, or he would stand a chance of being thrown out. You may smile, Jimmy, but it was the most painful and awful moment of my life. I won the toss of

## The One Before

course; I had no trouble in that, for he was a mere baby in such matters. He handed over the ring, and I slipped it into my pocket; but for some time it did



not make any difference. I was horribly frightened, for Desormeaux had warned me that, though the acquired personality might disappear the moment that the ring was removed, it was also possible that it might linger for years, and that often when the ring took

## The One Before

effect most quickly, its effect remained longest. However, by getting him on to wrong platforms, I managed to make him miss two of the Epsom specials. Then he got angry, and said that I knew nothing about it, and he should go and ask a porter. But, even as he was speaking, I saw a change come over his face. The next moment he was tearing off those field-glasses and concealing them and the sporting papers under his coat. The change back had come at last. 'Well,' I said, 'do you admit that the ring that I lent you has a curious and supernatural power?' "

"And what did he say?"

"Denied it. Said that he had been hypnotized, and that I had done it. He was furious, and accused me of trying to ruin him. It appeared that he was due to lunch at Fulham—at the palace—that day. Ungrateful beggar, after all the trouble that I had taken to stop him from compromising himself any worse!"

"And that was why you gave up the experiments?"

"No, I gave them up because I was unable to remember for the time who was the last wearer. I am still unable to remember that. It will come back one of these days, because I never really forget anything, but at present my mind is an absolute blank on the subject. I have a vague idea that it was a man or woman engaged in an unusual profession or avocation, but beyond that I can't go. However, our friend

## The One Before

Ernest Saunders Barley could not very well be changed for the worse, and I don't think you need have any fear in giving him the ring and asking him to wear it for your sake? That's what you must do. I'll take my chance of getting the ring back when I want it."

"I don't quite like it. If the ring has the powers that you say, then it's far too risky a thing. For all you know, the last wearer may have been a drunkard or even a homicidal lunatic."

"Personally, I would sooner be both than be Ernest Saunders Barley. However, in that case, which is improbable, I should have no objection to your taking any steps—even forcible steps—to make him give up the ring again."

"That might be too late. And if the ring had no effect whatever it would be a disappointment for you, and useless trouble to me."

Uncle Nathaniel's eyes became a shade brighter. He smiled.

"So, after all that I have said, you are not quite sure that the ring has any powers at all. Very natural; but you only leave me one course, Jimmy, and that is to convince you."

A deep-toned clock struck a solemn note.

"One o'clock!" exclaimed Uncle Nathaniel.  
"What on earth would the esteemed Ernest Saunders

## The One Before

think of us? More debauchery! Come to bed at once, Jimmy."

"And when I'm asleep," said Jimmy, "you come and slip that infernal ring on my finger?"

"Not at all. You're safe. You have eaten my salt, and a deuce of a lot of it there was in that soup too. But you're going to be convinced. On that I am prepared to bet one hundred guineas to a half-penny stamp."

"That's simply irresistible. I take you."

After Jimmy had gone to his room, Mr. Brookes unlocked with care a small safe, and took out the ring in question. He surveyed it for some moments and seemed on the point of putting it on his own finger. Then he changed his mind and locked it up in the safe again. He wrote one or two directions for his servant on a memorandum tablet on the table, and then switched off the lights and went to bed. He had quite decided what to do.

## CHAPTER VII

JIMMY sat down to breakfast looking very fresh and young and gloomy. He had been communing with himself in the night watches, and the results had not been satisfactory. He had risen with an extremely low opinion of himself and a very good appetite.



"Mr. Brookes has already breakfasted, sir," said Tarver.

"Oh? What time was that?"

"About two hours ago. He desired me to tell him as soon as you came in."

## The One Before

"Very well, Tarver. Devilled chicken? Well, yes, I think so."

A moment or two later Mr. Brookes came in from the library where he had left Johnson wrestling with his correspondence.

"Morning, Jimmy," he said cheerfully. "You're a pretty lazy beggar, don't you think?"

"I'm a hopeless slacker all round," said Jimmy, with an air of settled melancholy.

"Well, at present you are taking your much-needed repose. Of course when you start painting again things will be different."

"It would be if I went back to Paris. I did really get some work done the years I was there. And it would be all right if I took a studio in London. But stopping at home at Linthwaite I shall never do anything."

"Percy always tells me that you're free to do as much toil as you like there."

"So I am, in theory. He's a very good sort. He's run me up no end of a fine studio there, and five days out of the seven I never go near the place. There are too many other things to do. There are Percy's horses to ride, and now there will be his birds to shoot. He and Jennie are hospitable people, and there are always visitors stopping in the house. No one could work there; I don't believe anybody can work at home.

## The One Before

You'll see, the place will be simply full up when we get there. And Percy's a lazy beggar, except where sport is concerned, though he'd lose his wool if he were told so. Laziness is infectious, and I go off with him and lose my morning. Besides, I can't get any models there. The atmosphere is all wrong. When we go up there on Thursday, I'm going to tell Percy that I've got to clear out. He won't like it, but that can't be helped. If you are going to do any painting you can't play about with it. It's do it or leave it. I shall find a studio for myself somewhere Chelsea way, and get to work again properly. I can't stand this kind of thing any longer."

"Bit sudden, all this?" said Uncle Nathaniel.

"Not very. I was talking about it to somebody a few days ago."

"And what did he say?"

Jimmy began with great discretion. "What was said was with regard to slacking generally, but I couldn't help applying it to my own case. She's a girl that——" And now the secret was out.

"I suppose," said Uncle Nathaniel, grimly, "that I am right in supposing that the girl in this instance is Miss Hilda Derriford."

"Well, as a matter of fact—er—yes. But don't misunderstand it, uncle. One may have a great respect for a woman's opinion, and be anxious that she

## The One Before

shouldn't think one any worse ass than can be helped, and yet at the same time——” He paused abruptly, and then added, “ Besides, what would be the use if I did? ”

“ Speaking plainly,” said Uncle Nathaniel—and his manner was not altogether unsympathetic, “ do you mean to marry Miss Derriford? ”

“ Children may want the moon.”

“ Now, look here. I don't come the antique and advisory uncle over you much, as a general rule. You're too old for it, and, besides, I'm thankful to say you don't need it. But I'll make a suggestion. As far as the painting goes, I think you're right, and I'll tell your brother so. You began well. Last Academy——”

“ Oh, that means nothing.”

“ It may mean very little. But my point is not so much that you have done well as that the men who ought to know tell me that you might do much better. The accident that you have sufficient independent means should improve your chance; you can afford to do your best. But you can also afford to do nothing.”

“ Which is precisely what I have done for the last year.”

“ Very well, then; go ahead and come to London. It will be pleasant to have you handy, and I won't

## The One Before

interrupt your work any more than is good for you. But, as far as Miss Derriford is concerned, I think you are in danger of being a little too abject. Modesty is all right, but there are limits. If we only married the women that are no better than ourselves, the few marriages that did take place would be better undone. It may seem queer advice from an old bachelor, but ” —and there was a touch of bitterness in his voice— “ one may learn from failures.”

“ Ah ! ” said Jimmy; “ but you don’t know her.”

“ I knew her when she was a child, and she gave every promise then that when she grew up she would be human. It is quite possible that she will never care for you in the least; but if I were you I should not decide that without consulting her. And now I’ve got a bit of news to give you about that ring.”

“ What ring? Oh yes, The One Before. I hadn’t been thinking about it. It would be interesting to have a look at it.”

“ I’m afraid I can’t show it to you. It’s gone.”

“ Not stolen? ”

“ Oh no; but I sent it off by post an hour ago, in a registered parcel addressed to our friend Barley. I sent him a nicely worded telegram at the same time, to tell him that a ring was sent to him, and asking him to wear it. I’m afraid that I took the liberty of signing the telegram with your name. I hardly knew

## The One Before

him well enough to send him the ring myself. But it will be all right. If anything goes wrong, I will take all responsibility, and clear you."

"I say! But really, uncle, you shouldn't."

"Yes, technically I shouldn't. But I doubted whether you would send it at all if you were left to



yourself. I know of no one in the world that I value less than Ernest Saunders Barley, and he was therefore a suitable person on whom to recommence my experiments. I do not know, of course, with what character and temperament the ring will invest him, for I am still unable to remember who was the last wearer; but the chances are that he will be greatly im-

## The One Before

proved. Should the ring turn out disastrously, I will of course stop it as soon as I can."

"I don't half like it. I'm not particularly sweet on Ernest, but I don't want to do Mary a bad turn."

"Nor do I. I seem to have been precipitate; but there is really much less risk than you suppose. For one thing, I feel sure that if the last wearer had been a criminal, I should have been too much interested in the experiment to forget about it. And there is another point: the ring in most cases takes effect very gradually. It was not so in the case of my friend the bishop; but it is generally so. If I found that the thing was developing badly, I should get the ring away again."

"But how are you to know? And how are you to get the ring back?"

"I've written to old Derriford, and I shall hear from him, though of course he knows nothing about the ring. Probably I shall go down there later. Possibly you might be able to run down again yourself. And one can get any ring if one only knows where it is. One can ask for it, or buy it, or steal it. I've taken a certain amount of liberty with your name, and for that I'm very sorry, of course; but I expect it will turn out all right. What are you going to do with yourself this morning?"

"I'm going to one or two house-agents for orders,

## The One Before

and then I'm going to look at the studios right away. The new *régime* has begun."

"Good," said Uncle Nathaniel, meditatively. "Let me see. It's a pretty situation. You are improving yourself. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Hilda Derriford is improving you. In the next room is the anæmic but grammatical Johnson, who is improving me; at least, he's trying it on. And finally I, by means of The One Before, am improving Ernest Saunders Barley. I wonder which of us will make the biggest mess of it!"

## CHAPTER VIII

MR. BARLEY sat at breakfast looking like a vindictive ferret. Beside his plate lay a newspaper cutting that showed some slight traces of wear. Mary watched him rather anxiously. She had already been told what was the matter. He stabbed his poached egg to the heart, glanced at the grim carnage on his plate with ferocity, helped himself to pepper, and resumed—

“I remember it perfectly. It was on the day that James Havern at last relieved us of his presence. I called to you from the top of the stairs that the cutting was on the top of the clock in the dining-room, and I asked you to read it. I find it now, not on the clock but behind it—crumpled, dusty, and unread. This kind of thing is enough to make a man despair.”

“I didn’t know that it was of any immediate importance. You said yourself that there might be nothing in it, or something of that kind.”

“(Toast, please. Thank you.) Pray do not make silly excuses of that sort. You would do much better to say simply that you thought my wishes need not be regarded in the least, and therefore you forgot it.”

## The One Before

“ Really, Ernest, I don’t want to disregard any of your wishes. I was just going out, and I didn’t think you wanted me to look at it at once. Then, after-



wards, I forgot it. There isn’t one man in a million that has your marvellous memory for little things. Do let me read it now.”

He had known that she would ask to be allowed to read it, and it had been his intention to say that no power on earth would induce him to let her read it after what had occurred. But Mary’s servile flattery had somewhat soothed this twopence-halfpenny tyrant.

“ If my memory is at all remarkable,” he said, “ that is due—partly, at any rate—to the fact that I have taken trouble with it—trained and schooled it. Here is the cutting, if you wish to see it. You will notice

## The One Before

that it is stated that these paper bed-coverlets have already been tried in a cottage hospital and have been found satisfactory."

Mary read the extract through piously, and did her best to flog up some semblance of an interest in the question.

"Were you thinking of using these paper blankets?"

"Not in my own house. It would hardly be in keeping. I was thinking rather of the thriftless and improvident poor. Suppose I give away a lot of blankets at Christmas—the usual blankets?" (This picture of a beneficent Barley succouring the poor of Shalton was a piece of the most undisciplined imagination.)

"How am I to know that those blankets will be used as I intend? In all probability in a few days they are pawned, and the money spent in drink. Now, the paper blanket would put no temptation in their way; a pawnbroker wouldn't look at it. Besides, they could afford to provide these paper blankets themselves, and thus a risk of pauperization would be removed. I often ask myself what right I have by an act of ill-considered generosity to destroy a man's self-respect and to——"

But at this moment Jane entered with a telegram on a salver. Mr. Barley tore open the envelope and found that the message covered more than one sheet. He read it through, frowned, and said that there was no answer. As soon as Jane had gone he turned to

## The One Before

his wife again. "Mary, this is a telegram from that man James Havern. I will read it to you. And I may premise that there was no necessity to telegraph at all.



It is from first to last an act of mad extravagance. The address is: 'Ernest Saunders Barley, Esquire. The Chestnuts, Shalton, Surrey.' (Barley, Shalton, would have been ample.) It goes on: 'I am sending to you in a registered packet a small memento of my delightful visit. It is of no great value, but you may be interested in it as a curio. The ring is of old Persian workmanship, and if you consent to wear it I shall be greatly complimented. With renewed expressions of gratitude and my best love to yourself and Mary, Jimmy.'"

"But it's not the least bit like Jimmy," exclaimed Mary. "He never talked like that."

## The One Before

"I am afraid it is only too much like him. All that is important in that telegram, which cost upwards of six shillings, could have been sent for sixpence. And, as I have already pointed out, there was no occasion to telegraph at all. That telegram is an act of foolish and criminal extravagance, and for that reason it is just what I expected from James Havern. His present will be returned to him of course. I do not keep an hotel, and I have no wish to be paid for recognizing and amply fulfilling the duties of a host."

"But I don't think that's Jimmy's idea at all. You see, he points out that the ring he is sending you is of no money value. It's only interesting."

"I think," said the irritated ferret, as he rose from his chair, "I am fairly capable of understanding exactly what James Havern means. At present he is under an obligation to me: I prefer to leave it so. There is no more to be said."

Mary did not contest the point at the moment, but later in the day when the registered parcel arrived, she took it up to Ernest's workroom. Ernest happened to be in the Christian-martyr phase.

"I suppose," said Mary, "I may just have a peep at the ring?"

"By all means, if you wish it," said Mr. Barley. He was rather curious to see the contents of the packet himself.





## The One Before

"But it's charming," cried Mary. "I wonder what the inscription means. Look, it fits this finger exactly."

"It will be sent back to-morrow. Until then you can wear it of course, if it gives you any pleasure. He was probably correct in saying that it was of no value. I hate meanness. But it does not matter. As I have already told you, I have done with that young man finally. I hope that he will now understand that, and give me no more trouble."

Mary did not attempt a word in poor Jimmy's defence. But the ring gave her a quite peculiar pleasure, and she did not mean to relinquish it, if she could help it. Possibly Ernest would be less severe after dinner—that sometimes happened. In the mean time, she still wore the ring.

But after dinner she found that a change had come over her point of view. For the first time in her life her affection for her husband took the form of an effort to prevent him from being silly.

"About that ring of Jimmy's," she said. "You can't return it. It would be absurd."

Mr. Barley stared absolutely aghast. Had Mary gone mad?

"You see," she continued, playing with the ring on her finger, "if you take offence with Jimmy about what was, after all, a mere trifle, and make a family

## The One Before

quarrel of it, you will be laughed at; and it will be very unpleasant for me."

"Are you venturing to question my conduct?" exclaimed Mr. Barley, vehemently. "Do you presume to dictate to me what I am to do, and what I am not?"

"Please don't shout. It is rude, and I don't like it. I'm only saying that if you do as you propose it will be very inconvenient and unpleasant for me. Of course, if that makes no difference to you, there is no more to be said."

"Well," said Mr. Barley, feebly, "if you put it like that. Mind, I am not going to wear that ring, or to have anything to do with it."

"You needn't. I mean to wear it myself. I've taken a fancy to it. All you have got to do is to write a civil letter of thanks to Jimmy."

"I have a little pride. It may be wrong, but I have it; and I have the greatest objection to taking a present from that class of person."

"Please don't speak of him as if he were a criminal, or an inferior. It is quite enough to say that you don't like him. If you are so anxious to even matters up, you can send him a present afterwards—a piece of your wood-carving, for instance."

This last suggestion was not altogether unwelcome to Mr. Barley. The out-put of his futile fretwork was,

## The One Before

as a rule, largely in excess of the demand for it. Here was a *bonâ fide* opportunity for planting a piece on somebody.

"Well," he said, "I have a little thing in hand just now that might be suitable. It is intended for the mantelpiece, to—er—to hold small objects. Shaped like a wheelbarrow, with a decorative design on the sides, and an ornamental wheel. I thought it rather an ingenious idea when I saw the pattern."

"I'm sure Jimmy would appreciate it. And you will write a letter that won't let him see——"

"In these little matters of social diplomacy I think you can trust me." He grasped his small chin, and unconsciously assumed a Machiavelian expression. "If occasion arises, I can wear the mask, and, perhaps, it would take a man more astute than James Havern to penetrate it."

"You do these things so well. I should love to see that letter."

"You shall do so, if you will wait a minute," said Mr. Barley, as he took the cover from the typewriter. The letter ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR JAMES,

"I am very glad to hear that you enjoyed your visit to my humble abode. Pray believe that I welcome your charming present as it deserves. I hope

## The One Before

that my thanks may shortly take the more solid form of a small example of my wood-carving, if you will be kind enough to accept it. Thanks also for your reckless, and very expensive telegram. Mary has taken a great fancy to the ring, and I know that you will join with me in giving her permission to wear it.

"Yours, etc."



"Splendid!" said Mary. "You do put these things so well. And you hardly stopped a moment to think about it. Thanks so much, dear. I will tell Ellen to post it at once."

It never occurred to Mary that for the first time in her life she had made her husband do what she wanted, in opposition to his own determination. It did not

## The One Before

even strike her that she had accused him of being ridiculous, had told him not to shout, and had said that she meant to wear the ring, without even going through the form of asking his permission. If she had been told that her subsequent flattery was given as one might give a biscuit to a dog that had done its trick correctly, she would have been surprised. Nor had her husband recognized that here was the beginning of the end of his despotic government. But, all the same—faintly and very gradually at present—The One Before was getting to work.

## CHAPTER IX

A FEW days later the hireling cab that had been bidden to take the Barleys to dinner at the Derrifords' waited in the drive at The Chestnuts. It was twenty minutes to eight, and in Mr. Barley's opinion quite time they started. He paced the hall impatiently. His white silk muffler was carefully packed round his stringy throat; his latch-key was in one pocket, and a shilling reposed in another for the purposes of largesse if that should not be decently avoidable. He was ready, ready almost to over-ripeness, and Mary was keeping him waiting. It seemed to him that during these last few days something had come over Mary; it was time to make a pretty determined stand, and here was the opportunity. She came down the stairs at last, with an irritating appearance of not being in any particular hurry, and James assisted them to their straw-perfumed equipage. So far Mr. Barley had checked himself; but the fire burned within him, and as they passed down the drive, at last he spake with his tongue.

"Once and for all, Mary," he said, "this kind of thing cannot go on."

## The One Before

“It is rather bad. But the provincial four-wheeler always is abominable. I don’t think it would do much good to make a row about it. It always seems to me to be a pity, as we’ve got stabling——”



“Kindly allow me to explain what I mean, and don’t rush to your own conclusions. You kept this cab waiting in the drive for eight minutes, for which I presume a charge will be made. And you also kept me waiting in the hall for a similar time. There I

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walked to and fro, in a strong draught, perfectly ready—and that kind of thing cannot continue.”

“Well, it hasn’t continued. It stopped when I came down.” (And could this be the timorous Mary that scarcely a week before had hidden the offending skipping-rope from the eyes of her husband lest it should awake his wrath again?) “How can you be so childish, Ernest? If you didn’t like the draught in the hall you could have gone into the library—if you hadn’t been hunting for a grievance. And if you think that I’m going to sit on the door-step to welcome this broken-down flea-box at the moment of its arrival, you’re very much mistaken. That cab will have to wait just as long as I choose.” It was said smilingly and good-temperedly; but it was actually said, and apparently it was meant.

“Am I to understand, then, that you propose to disregard my authority and my wishes entirely?”

“Now, don’t you worry about your authority, dear. That’s all right. You needn’t be always measuring it and taking its temperature. As for your wishes, I’ll do anything you want that’s reasonable. Only you are not to get cross and make a fuss about nothing, or you won’t get any fun.”

Mr. Barley observed gloomily that if he wanted any fun he would mention it. It was not a satisfactory observation; the more he thought about it the more

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he felt that. And before he could qualify himself further for the International Gold Medal for Pure Fatuousness, Mary had begun to talk about something quite different.

In the mean time, Mrs. Dawes having asked and been accorded the evening, The Chestnuts was left in the sole charge of Jane and Ellen (surnamed Maudie).

"Look here, my girl," said Jane, shortly after Mr. Barley's cab had left, "I'm not going to set in the nasty old kitchen. Let's go into the library. There's comfortable chairs there. Besides, I want to write a line to George, and I like their note-paper better than what I've got myself."

"Well, I'm agreeable," said Ellen, rather despondently. "In about a month's time I shan't be setting along of you, my dear."

"Still harping on it?" said Jane.

"Yes, that worries me, that does. And it's not only the chance that I'll get the sack, for I don't suppose as I should be long without a place. It's that I do hate to have forgotten anything. I rather prides myself on my memory."

"I tell you again that you're all right, and no one will be any the wiser. That registered parcel what came for Mr. Barley was from Mr. James Havern, though the writing on it wasn't his. I know all about it, because I heard them talking about it at dinner

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next day. It was a present of a ring to him, though it's she as wears it. So that letter as was given you to post was just a letter thanking Mr. 'Avern. That won't be none the worse for having laid in your work-basket a few days. It ain't like a letter as wants answering. Mr. 'Avern will get it to-night or to-morrow



morning, and all he'll think will be as Mr. E. S. B. has took his time."

"I hope it may be so. Of course there may have been other things in the letter as you don't know about. How I come to do it I can't think. I just put it down for a moment, my basket happening to

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be there, and then it went right out of my mind. Never give another thought to it till I found it there this morning. Mrs. Dawes said to me, 'Could you spare me a needle of black thread?' I said that of course I could—my motto being to oblige them that obliges me. I went to my basket and there was that letter. It turned me quite faint. Mrs. Dawes noticed it. She says: 'Whatever is the matter?' 'Matter?' I says. 'This should have been in the letter-box three days ago.' I was as white as a sheet, and I could feel my heart going. Without no more words, she poured me out a little drop of the cooking sherry, and made me take it off. That do make you cough too. Then she give the letter to Simmonds's boy to take at once, and told me to hope for the best, same as you do. She's a kind woman, that Mrs. Dawes, you know. Her 'usband was a fool to leave her; but then, most men are fools."

Ellen picked up her work-basket.

"I'll leave this door ajar," said Jane, "so that if by any chance the bell should ring we shan't miss it."

They went on into the library, lit the lamps, and made themselves comfortable—Ellen in an easy-chair, and Jane recumbent on the sofa.

"That don't look much like writing letters to your everlasting George," said Ellen.

"Time enough for that. It'll be eleven or after be-

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fore they're back. It's a comfort to put your feet up. That's a funny thing—some shoes do draw the feet and some don't, and you never know."

"I don't think shoes has much to do with it. It's more the being on your legs so long. I know some days the muscles of mine—well, it's more like the toothache than anything else. Talking of toothache I say, why don't he wear that ring himself?"

"What? Mr. Ernest Saunders? Well, I've not arst him yet. Some men don't care about jewelry. George don't."

"What? Don't George wear the fam'ly diamonds?"

"Don't you be too funny, my girl. A small pin in the tie and his watch—that's as far as George ever goes, even on a Sunday."

"Still, it ain't like darling Ernest to go giving her a ring."

"I dare say as he's making it do for her next birthday. Besides, it ain't much of a ring, and that's a fact. It don't look to me as if it were gold. And there's no stones or anything. I were quite surprised, for Mr. 'Avern is a generous man, as a rule."

"And is that still going on between Ernest and her—you know—that what you told me?"

"Rather! I should think so. More and more. You mark my words, he must have just gone a bit too

## The One Before

far one of these days, and that's roused her spirit at last. If things go on as they is going on, in a very few weeks she'll be the master. Oh, there was one bit I meant to tell you. It was last night at dinner. Seemed that the ongly wasn't what he wanted. He



worked himself up about that, and spoke to her—well, very sharp and cross it was. She give him a laughing answer, but there was a look in her eye, and when I went out I hung round the door for a minute. My word! She just did give it him straight. Quite quiet

## The One Before

—no shouting and no weeping—but she just took the skin off him. I can't remember the half of it, but it was all good goods. He didn't hold out long; he was soon begging her pardon. And he was a bit scared, too; all the rest of dinner he was just as civil to her as he knew how."

"I never! Well, it will do him good. I can see how it's come about. I think, Mr. 'Avern must have noticed that Mr. E. S. B. wanted taking down a peg. Either he gave her the tip direct, or—what's more likely—he managed to get a hint dropped through her sister, what married Mr. 'Avern's brother."

"No, that's not it. She's different all round. She's got a look now, when she's telling you anything, that she never had before. It's my belief that it's some kind of a conversion—like what they has in the Salvation Army."

"Anyhow, it's one more warning against the married state, at any rate, for them that know how to read it. Here you get two people side by side, quarrelling which of them is to be first. Where's your peace and quietness? Love's nothing but a snare. I wonder a smart girl like you can be taken in by it. Begins too hot and ends too cold, as I've heard Mrs. Dawes say often."

"She's prejudiced. It's a nice look-out for you. Work hard all your life till you gets too old for it.

## The One Before

Then you may die and get buried by the parish. Nice sort of treat that. No, I'd sooner have a man to work for me, thank you."

"And I'd sooner work for myself. A girl of spirit and sense and ambition, won't never come to the work-house. I've got my independence, and I've got my ambitions too."

"It ain't every cook as would learn you things, the way Mrs. Dawes do."

"I know that. And don't I go outside my own work to help her? After this, I'll get a regular cook's place, and then work up. And in five years' time or less, I'll be doing the superior jobbing. Well-paid work, and holidays to suit yourself. You can take a three months' job, and then you can afford to have your fortnight at the seaside, and put by money in the bargain."

"But you don't look at the loneliness of it."

"I'd sooner have that than be as you will, with half a dozen squalling——"

Jane sprang to her feet with indignation. "If you get talking like that, Maudie, you and me will quarrel. I won't have it." She went over to the writing-table and sat down. "Why, here's that funny thing of his—stylographic thingamy. 'Ow'd it be to try writing with it? The silly thing won't make no mark. What ought you to do? Jerk it? Like that? 'Arder?

## The One Before

Oh, I say, Maudie, blest if I ain't fetched the point up against the table! I do hope it's not hurt it. These things are too cranky for my taste. I'll try one of the other pens. Here's a beauty. How do you spell Tuesday? That's a thing I never could remember."





## CHAPTER X

AMONG the guests at the Derrifords' was Mr. Carvell Smythe, a young Oxford don, of some repute as an Oriental scholar. He was a distant connection of Mrs. Derriford's, and wished to make the connection somewhat closer by marrying her daughter Hilda. Unfortunately for this scheme, Hilda had no intention of marrying Mr. Carvell Smythe. For the rest, he was a particularly neat, well-groomed little man, with commonplace good looks, and a manner that was a shade too confident.

He took Mary in to dinner, and during dinner she noticed once or twice that he was looking attentively at the rings on her left hand. When the men came into the drawing-room afterwards, Mary was playing with Hilda's bull-dog, talking to him as if he had been her son, and teaching him to sit up. He had not the sweet temper possessed by most of his kind, and in theory he was never allowed in the house at all. In practice he sometimes came to look for Hilda, and,

## The One Before

if the family were quite alone, succeeded in remaining for the evening; but he was always kept out of the way when guests were present or expected. On this occasion, however, through somebody's negligence or his own intelligence, he had found his way to the drawing-room. A few days before, Mary would have welcomed the instant order for his removal. Now she caught him by the collar, and pleaded that he might stop for a little. It was immediately evident that she was perfectly safe with him. Of the other ladies, with the exception of Hilda, he took no notice whatever. Ernest Saunders Barley was fond of money, but not for one thousand pounds would he have attempted to take the liberties with that dog that his wife was doing; and if he had, Peter would in all probability have made the thousand pounds of more interest to his heirs and assigns than to Ernest Saunders personally.

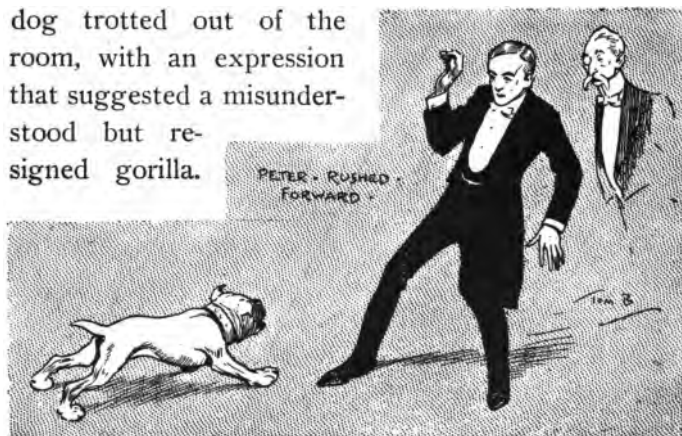
When the men came in, Peter rushed forward, with his coat up, and with every other indication that he wished to eat Mr. Carvell Smythe. Mary caught him, and pulled him back, spoke to him, and spanked him gently. Peter calmed down. Possibly he had observed that the last person to enter was Mr. Derriford, who, with all his good humour and easy-going ways, did not spoil his dogs, and was deeply respected by them.

## The One Before

"That's rather a dangerous plaything for you, Mary," said Mr. Derriford. "Get out, you scoundrell!"

"Speaking to me?" asked Mary, maliciously.

"Not the last remark. That's for Peter. And, you see, he knows it." The dog trotted out of the room, with an expression that suggested a misunderstood but resigned gorilla.



"And he knows that he's got no business to be in here at all."

"It's my fault," said Mary: "I wanted him."

"You shall be forgiven, on the condition that you give us a little music presently." (Ah! that "little music!" and how much it is!)

Mr. Carvell Smythe made his way to the vacant place next Hilda Derriford. Possibly Hilda did not

## The One Before

observe it; possibly she did; at any rate, she crossed the room and sat by Mr. Barley. Now, there was nothing clandestine and devilish about Ernest Saunders Barley, but all the same, he was rather flattered, that the prettiest woman in the room seemed to desire to converse with him. They spoke of her sister, who was away, stopping with the Hyrleys. Mr. Barley permitted himself a little badinage. It was heavy, but delicate and very little used; it only came out on these social occasions, and it suited him about as well as the costume of the ballerina would suit a bishop. He could not have told you exactly how it was that subsequently their conversation concerned itself with Jimmy Havern. Hilda made sundry disparaging remarks with regard to that poor young man, and Mr. Barley was lured on. He concurred heartily, and permitted himself to be satirical on the subject of Jimmy's pictures. Then Hilda suddenly turned round, and defended Jimmy hotly. A moment later, she was telling her father that it was wrong of him to monopolize Mary, when everybody was dying to hear her play. Mary went to the piano, and Mr. Carvell Smythe followed her there, watching her hands as she played. She had been well trained, and, though her natural gifts were not remarkable, her rendering of the familiar waltz of Chopin's would not have made a musician ill; it was accurate, at least. When the murmurs of thanks

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had died away, and the audience found itself free to talk again, Mr. Smythe said—

“I wonder if I might look at that very curious and interesting ring of yours.”

Mary took it off and handed it to him. “It was given to me only the other day.”

“It is very interesting.” He examined it closely. “I suppose no consideration would induce you to part with it?”

“Well, I didn’t bring it out with a view to selling it. No; it was a present, and I never sell presents. I sometime break them, or lose them, or give them away; but I don’t sell them. In fact I can’t remember that I ever sold anything.”

“You must forgive me for the suggestion. The ring has, unless I am mistaken, rather a curious history. I know of people who would be very glad to get it on almost any terms.”

“Yes?” said Mary, without much interest. “I knew it was rather a curiosity. It’s funny how the craze of collecting gets hold of one.”

Mr. Carvell Smythe was about to say that this was not exactly what he meant, but at the moment he saw another opportunity, and this time he was more successful in securing the attention of Hilda. She led him gently and tenderly on, to make an idiot of himself. He struggled and got deeper. The ghastly

## The One Before

sense that he was not doing himself justice seemed to paralyze him. He was a clever man, and he found himself talking like a fool—not a particularly well-bred fool either.

It was almost a mercy when the vicar's daughter, a portly young lady, sang to a cheerful and presumably Old English strain, that she would "trip it, trip it, trip it, trip it, and tree-hip it up and down." Then, as the congregation repeated the usual responses, a euphemistic servant announced Mrs. Barley's carriage.

On the following day Mr. Carvell Smythe returned to London, where he was engaged in British Museum research. For the present he allowed the British Museum to wait, and, after luncheon, he walked towards Leicester Square. In a back street in that musical neighbourhood there is a small and dirty shop, its notice-board indicating that the proprietor is "E. Carcow, dealer in pictures and works of art." Its grimy windows are filled with objects of this description, mostly rubbish. But that notice is an understatement. Mr. Carcow does indeed deal in pictures and works of art, when they come in his way; but he is also prepared to deal in almost anything else, from a second-hand frying-pan upwards. The shop's appearance of poverty is also misleading; if you have ten thousand pounds' worth of diamonds that you are prepared to part with for half that sum, Mr. Car-

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cow will not keep you waiting an hour for your money.

As Mr. Carvell Smythe entered the shop, Carcow emerged from behind his desk. He was a man of sixty, completely bald, and emaciated with the fever of a thousand bargains. His eyes peered short-sightedly from under the thick brows. His air was patient and humble. One long yellow hand played nervously with his ragged grey beard. His shoulders were stooping and his back bent. He was a mixture of nationalities, but he had been in England forty years, and spoke the language well enough.

"Ah! Good morning, Mr. Smythe. A long time, sir, since I have had the pleasure."

"Morning," said Mr. Smythe, as he sat down on the stool by the counter. "If your prices were a little better you would see me a little oftener."

"But I have some things now that are cheap enough for any man. You buy old carved ivories, I remember. Well, you come on the right day. A chance that will not be again in London. And I tell you why——"

"Hold on a minute, Carcow. Do you remember telling me a cock-and-bull story about a ring of gold and bronze?"

"It was a true story. That ring—the 'Sahib-i-dírína'—is worth, perhaps, one sovereign, if you take

## The One Before

it to other shops. I give one hundred pounds for it. It is no cock-and-bull. Hand me over the ring: I pay at once."

"Don't get so excited about it. You say you heard about it from a friend of yours at Bussorah."

"Yes, a friend in the trade. He instructed me, and



I told one or two other friends in the trade in London—not many, for there are few who could read the inscription, and many whom I could not trust. I also told you, because you know the Oriental languages. Now, sir, a hundred sovereigns for it!"

## The One Before

Mr. Smythe lit a cigarette leisurely.

"Look here," he said. "Who is the real buyer? Who is going to pay your friend in Bussorah for it?"

"That I do not know. He was instructed by an agent, and that agent in turn by another. My friend at Bussorah says that he thinks it is a religious thing—what you call hanky-panky. It must be a powerful man, a man with much money. For years he has been scratching up all the world to find it."

"Penny plain, and twopence coloured. Any more?"

"I do not know who the great man is, nor where he is. My friend at Bussorah does not know, nor does the agent who instructed him. We are like links in a chain, and what the other end of the chain is we cannot say. I have told you all that I know. Now, sir, have you got it?"

"You've not told me all you know, and I have not got the ring. But I saw it last night. I was away in the country, and only returned this morning. It was worn by a lady, and she will not sell it,—she said so; and she very much gave me the impression of a woman who means what she says. She was a stranger to me; I had never met her before. She let me examine the ring, though. It consists of a band of plain greenish bronze, with a tablet of gold about twice the

## The One Before

breadth of the band. Two serpents in gold, entwined, run round the band, the head of one biting the tail of the other. One head and tail come at the top of the tablet, and the other pair at the bottom. The inscription on the tablet is cut deep, and is quite unmistakable. It is, as you say, 'Sahib-i-dírína.' ”

Carcow seemed to be agitated. “ Ah! That is it,” he exclaimed. “ Found at last! Now—well, what shall I say? I am ready to do anything you wish. You will tell me the name of this lady, and where she lives. I cannot offer a gentleman a commission, of course. But expenses—shall I say twenty or twenty-five for expenses? Or you might prefer it in another form—a little souvenir. Those ivories I spoke of are very fine. You might wish to select a nice important piece, sir. I will meet you any way you like.”

“ I don't take commissions from dealers, not even when they're disguised as expenses or souvenirs. And I'm not going to give you the information you want. I suggested to the lady that I knew of some one who would give a very high price for that ring; that was as far as I could go for you; and I got snubbed for my pains. I'm not going to be the means of her being bothered any further about it. You know now that the ring is still in existence, that it is in England, and that it is not in London. That's all you'll know from me. Incidentally, if I happened to have the ring my-

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self, I should want a thousand pounds for it—and you would pay it. You are rather keen on getting that ring, you know, Carcow. Now let me hear no more about it; my mind's made up. You can show me those ivories if you like."

Carcow grasped the lappels of his coat with both hands; he seemed on the verge of an outburst of fury. Then, possibly, an idea occurred to him. His manner changed at once.

"Well, sir, this is a great disappointment to me. I had no idea you would take it like that. It does seem hard to come so near a thing, and then miss it. But I know, of course, how you gentlemen are hampered by your rules and regulations. I cannot complain. I show you the ivories."

Mr. Smythe bought a couple of pieces at a very moderate price, and Carcow seemed well content.

"And where shall I send them?" he asked, with his fingers on the pen.

Mr. Smythe, totally unsuspecting, gave the address of his hotel.

"The boy shall bring them round to-night," said Carcow.

But it was not the boy who took the ivories round that evening. It was Mr. Carcow himself. And he managed to have a conversation, of great interest to himself, with the second boots.

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Later on, that obliging boots met Mr. Carcow in the private bar of a neighbouring hotel.

"I've got it for you," said the boots, exultingly.



"There was one foreign, which I wrote down to make no mistake."

"Never mind that."

"There was an Oxford label, and a fresher one which was Shalton. The others were all London stations."

"Thank you," said Carcow. "That will do. Here is your money."

## The One Before

He still lingered after his informant had gone. He sipped his absinthe and reflected. So far he was satisfied. Thanks to the evidence of the labels on Mr. Smythe's luggage, the field of search was now narrowed down to Shalton for the time being. If the ring was not there, then the lady who wore it was a visitor, as Smythe had been, and it would be necessary to start again. But Smythe had said nothing to imply that the lady was a visitor, and the clue was quite good enough to follow up. And by the time that Carcow had finished his absinthe, he had quite made up his mind how to follow it up.



## CHAPTER XI

It was in the billiard-room at Linthwaite that Mr. Barley's letter of thanks for the ring, forgotten by Maudie and subsequently forwarded by that spotted secretary Mr. Johnson, was handed to James Havern. He was not more than pleasantly tired after the day's shoot, and had still enough energy to watch a game. He glanced carelessly through the letter until he was pulled up short by the passage which informed him that it was Mary, and not Ernest, who was wearing the ring. Then he began to be rather nervous. It seemed almost impossible to believe that a ring could really alter a personality. Yet Uncle Nathaniel absolutely believed in it; and Mr. Nathaniel Brookes was not a man who believed with any profusion. James felt that he would be happier if he could have a word with his uncle, just to be assured that the talk about The One Before had merely been a joke on his uncle's part. He found Mr. Brookes, who had not been shooting that day, hard at work in the library.

"Hullo!" said his uncle. "Where's everybody?"

"Don't know. Playing bridge, some of them.

## The One Before

Henderson and McAnvers are in the billiard-room. And I expect some of them are asleep. Look here. I've just got this letter, and I want to ask you about it. It's a letter to thank me for the ring (and our



friend Ernest Saunders has taken his time about it); but the point is that he's given the ring to Mary, and she's wearing it. I suppose you were merely pulling my leg as to the ring's magic powers; else I must say that I should be feeling rather uncomfortable."

Mr. Brookes looked thoughtful. "No," he said. "If I had been getting at you I should have hit on something much more probable. If Mary is wearing

## The One Before

the ring, she is inheriting the nature and temperament of the person who last wore it. I ought to have foreseen this possibility. I had a charming letter from old Derriford yesterday, and I think if anything much had been wrong with Mary he would have been bound to have mentioned it. The ring may not take effect at once, and it is not always the entire personality that is inherited. But all the same, I think it had better be got away. It's no end of a journey to Shalton, but that can't be helped; I'll see Percy, and leave by the early train to-morrow."

"Then you really do believe in it? I don't feel that I shall ever be able to do that until I've actually seen its effects. At the same time, I can't altogether disbelieve; if I could, I should be a good deal more comfortable. Can't I go instead? You could tell me how to get the ring away."

"That is precisely what I couldn't do without knowing how the land lies. In the course of my experiments with the ring I have frequently had to get it from people who did not want to give it up; as a rule, I have stolen it, and I'm afraid you have not had enough experience to make a good clean theft of it. I have even, on one difficult occasion, had to have recourse to drugs, and I'm afraid you don't understand drugs. No; it would be much better for me to go—thanks all the same. Besides, I am the respon-

## The One Before

sible person. It was I who sent the ring in your name."

"It's a pity," said Jimmy, "that you can't remember who it was that wore the ring last."

"My dear boy, you're talking nonsense. There is no man in the world who has a better memory than I have. I remember everything, to the last and minutest detail. The only trouble is that the memory is not always available. The facts that I wish to recall come back, but they take their own time about it. At any moment I may be able to recall who was the last wearer of The One Before. I never forget anything; my memory is miraculous. But one must give it its own time to operate."

"Of course," said Jimmy, without conviction. "This kind of thing bothers me, uncle. It's all very well for you, who have travelled all over the place, and are used to the Orientals and miracles generally. But I'm a twentieth-century, commonplace Britisher; and this kind of thing puts me off and makes me nervous. I don't understand what to do with it. It's not in the books. Speaking frankly, I wish I'd never had anything to do with it."

"But you haven't. It was I who suggested the ring, feeling sure that any change in Ernest must be an improvement. It was I who sent the ring. It is I who am going to leave to-morrow in order to get

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the ring back again. Yet I don't distress myself. Oh, wait!"

Mr. Nathaniel Brookes flung himself back in his chair with both hands pressed to his forehead.

"What is it?" asked Jimmy. "You remember something?"

"Yes. At least, I have always remembered it, but only now become conscious of it. It is a warning



that Desormeaux gave me on his death-bed—a warning that, I am sorry to say, I have neglected. I recall the scene vividly now. He was lying in a whitewashed hut outside Seville. He was a thin yellow beggar, wrapped up in a gaudy silk counterpane. It was just after he had told me to use the utmost discretion in my experiments. And he said, 'Do not let the sub-

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jects of your experiments, or anybody else, know that the ring possesses any magic powers. If you do, they will speak of it, and such talk spreads rapidly and far. That would enable the searchers for the Sahib-i-dírina to locate it; the search will go on always and everywhere. Once they know where it is, nothing on earth can stop them from getting it.' Those were his exact words, and after all these years I can recall them accurately. That's not a bad memory, I think."

"It's a pity you did not recall it before. And have you spoken to many people about the magic powers of the ring?"

"Fortunately, I have not. In one or two of my experiments I may have admitted that the ring possessed powers of some kind, but as a rule I said nothing about it. The only people to whom I have told the whole story are Johnson and yourself. I shall warn Johnson, and of course I shall cut the whole passage out of the book. In the mean time, do you happen to have mentioned it to anybody?"

"No; and I won't. It's lucky, for I have been on the verge of talking about it to Percy once or twice. By the way, you never told me how Desormeaux got it."

"No; Johnson cut that out. Well, as a matter of fact, he stole it. In justice to him I must tell you that he would have been quite willing to buy it, only the

# The One Before

There was not for sale immediately. He had to stop a  
man with the money to get it. (Previous?)  
"I will be in the house. (Owner) — the people who  
are working in it."  
"I will be in the house. (Owner) — the people who  
are working in it."

"I will be in the house. (Owner) — the people who  
are working in it."

"I will be in the house. (Owner) — the people who  
are working in it."

"I will be in the house. (Owner) — the people who  
are working in it."

## The One Before

nothing worse would happen to her in all probability than that she would sell it at what she would think an absurdly high price. It would be awkward for me, for it would mean that I had lost the ring for ever, which I should be sorry to do. But it would be rather pleasant than otherwise for her."

"And if she refused to sell it?"

"Then I admit that there might be trouble. But the chances are millions to one against it, and it is really not worth thinking about. Besides, I start for Shalton to-morrow myself, and if I find that the ring is deteriorating Mary in any way, I shall bring it back with me."

"I wish you would bring it back in any case."

"No. It may be doing a good work. Then it will be interesting to watch the experiment. Leave it to me. If anything goes wrong, I take the whole responsibility."

Jimmy slept badly that night, and dreamed of many murders. Consequently, he was very late in coming down the next morning. The only person that he found still at breakfast was Mr. Nathaniel Brooke's who should have started for Shalton about two hours before.

"Hullo!" said Jimmy; "missed your train?"

"No; I am not going, after all—at any rate not at present. I have explained to Percy that I had a letter

## The One Before

by the first post which made it unnecessary. As a matter of fact, my memory has been getting to work again. I have recalled who was the last wearer of the ring—a very decent man indeed, not unlike Mary in many respects, but with some fine qualities added.”

“Well,” said Jimmy, impatiently, “who was he?”



“He was by profession, and also by sheer love of it, a lion-tamer. He had a troupe of performing hyænas as well.”

“Yes, but as Mary doesn’t happen to have any lions or hyænas——”

“But she has a husband—a snappy little suburban-souled wife-bullying husband; and she’ll tame him.

## The One Before

She may even succeed in making some kind of a cheap imitation of a second-hand man out of him. That ring is doing a good work. It is our plain duty to leave it alone. In a week or two you'll be going to town to commence this serious work that there's been so much talk about. At the same time, I'll accept John Derri-ford's invitation, and run down to Shalton to see him. Then I shall see how the land lies. Leave it all to me, my boy. It's going splendidly."

And Jimmy, utterly bewildered, and hoping against hope that he might merely be the victim of some elaborate practical joke, was forced to assent.

## CHAPTER XII

*Extracts from the Diary of Ernest Saunders Barley.*

PERSONALLY, I should say that it was some long-arrested development of character. I have heard of such things. In some ways it is a gain. The condition of the table silver lately has been most satisfactory; the cleaning and polishing have been thoroughly done. And, speaking generally, the servants seem particularly anxious to please her. I should almost have said that they were slightly afraid of her, but for the absurdity of the idea of anybody being afraid of dear Mary. With her attitude towards me I am less satisfied. There is a something wanting. It is almost as if she had lost the power to appreciate me in the way that she used to do. I had invented two or three little variations with the skipping-rope, and called her in to see them; she did not seem in the least enthusiastic. There was a word or two as to my ingenuity and agility, but she said that they would be better employed in some real game. She does not disobey my commands, but she is forming a habit of getting me

## The One Before

to withdraw them. Of course I use my judgment in such matters; one must allow for these late developments of character, and for the present I frequently give way. I have the feeling that I do not know exactly what will happen if I do not. Naturally, I shall return to my old position as soon as I become more used to the situation. I am convinced that the old methods of expressing authority are of no use; they invariably put me wrong, and appear to represent me in an odious light. She is also much more exigent than she used to be. She wishes me to do things or not to do them; and she never seems to mind saying so. There never used to be anything of the kind. She shows a tendency to inquire into the relation of expenditure to income, and is far less easily satisfied on this point than was formerly the case. She makes no secret that she would like to have a horse to ride, and that she thinks I should provide it for her. The question of expenditure is a grave one, but I am unable to tell her that it would be quite impossible. It might, perhaps, be wiser—temporarily, while this crisis lasts—to give way. Indeed, her passion for animals has grown very much of late, and causes me some nervousness. She frequently takes Hilda Derriford's bulldog out with her—a very dangerous animal, that should certainly have been shot long ago.

The Hortus Siccus, a collection to which for the

## The One Before

past year I have given a considerable amount of my time, has now been destroyed. For some days past I have had hints that Mary did not really think very much of it, and yesterday afternoon, when we were



alone at tea, she spoke quite plainly about it. She said that if it had been part of a genuine study of botany, she would have said nothing about it, but that the love of doing neat things with gummed labels was merely childish, and people would laugh at me, and

## The One Before

she did not care to have her husband ridiculed. It is, as I said above—the faculty for appreciation seems to have disappeared completely. I was naturally a little put out. I went upstairs, fetched the Hortus Siccus, and took it out to the greenhouse stove. I then called Mary out, saying that I had something that I wished to show her. “There,” I said, “is a collection which represents practically a year’s work. Apparently you disapprove of it. Tell me to destroy it, and I will do it at once. I have matches here for the purpose. But if you do not care to go as far as that, pray refrain from criticisms of this kind in the future.” I did not say it crossly at all, though perhaps with a certain dignity. It was certainly my idea that she would shrink from this rash and necessarily final step.

On the contrary, she said, “That’s very good of you. I think you’d certainly better burn it and get quit of it altogether. I’d much sooner you gave the time to some outdoor game or sport, and Mr. Derri-ford is longing to teach you golf.”

“Say no more, Mary,” I said. “If you ask for this act of wanton and stupid destruction, you shall have it. But do not attempt to justify it.” I then set fire to the Hortus Siccus, turned away, and went straight up to my workroom. I must say that I expected that she would come up shortly afterwards to give me an apology, or at least a detailed explanation of her action.

## The One Before

the ring back again. Yet I don't distress myself. Oh, wait!"

Mr. Nathaniel Brookes flung himself back in his chair with both hands pressed to his forehead.

"What is it?" asked Jimmy. "You remember something?"

"Yes. At least, I have always remembered it, but only now become conscious of it. It is a warning



that Desormeaux gave me on his death-bed—a warning that, I am sorry to say, I have neglected. I recall the scene vividly now. He was lying in a whitewashed hut outside Seville. He was a thin yellow beggar, wrapped up in a gaudy silk counterpane. It was just after he had told me to use the utmost discretion in my experiments. And he said, 'Do not let the sub-

## The One Before

jects of your experiments, or anybody else, know that the ring possesses any magic powers. If you do, they will speak of it, and such talk spreads rapidly and far. That would enable the searchers for the Sahib-i-dírína to locate it; the search will go on always and everywhere. Once they know where it is, nothing on earth can stop them from getting it.' Those were his exact words, and after all these years I can recall them accurately. That's not a bad memory, I think."

"It's a pity you did not recall it before. And have you spoken to many people about the magic powers of the ring?"

"Fortunately, I have not. In one or two of my experiments I may have admitted that the ring possessed powers of some kind, but as a rule I said nothing about it. The only people to whom I have told the whole story are Johnson and yourself. I shall warn Johnson, and of course I shall cut the whole passage out of the book. In the mean time, do you happen to have mentioned it to anybody?"

"No; and I won't. It's lucky, for I have been on the verge of talking about it to Percy once or twice. By the way, you never told me how Desormeaux got it."

"No; Johnson cut that out. Well, as a matter of fact, he stole it. In justice to him I must tell you that he would have been quite willing to buy it, only the



## The One Before

gerate the element of chance in the game. There is more skill in it than I had supposed. Had I known how very much there was in it, I should certainly have started it years ago. I fancy I have been prejudiced against it by the talk of some duffer who had tried it and found himself no good. Derriford, by the way, is extremely pleased with my progress. It is astonishing to see that Mary, who can play, does not care in the least about it. She is really most good-tempered about being left so much alone. I have given her permission to hire a horse occasionally, so that she can ride with Hilda Derriford. But hiring is very expensive, and not satisfactory. I have gone very carefully into the question of figures with Derriford, and he is coming here to look at the stables, and see what would need to be done. But I have given no actual promise at present. Certainly, men who to my knowledge have a much less income do manage to keep horses.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am really becoming very remiss in the matter of this diary. I allow days and days to elapse without making an entry. I have had to see after the few alterations that Derriford thought would be wanted in the stables. There has also been golf, of course. Unfortunately, Derriford has Mr. Brookes staying with him at present, and Mr. Brookes does not play

## The One Before

golf, and is therefore of no use: what is worse, he prevents Derriford from playing. It is unfortunate, as he was about the only man that I could depend on for the mornings; as it is, I have to go round by my-



self. In the afternoons one can always get a game; but so many men let their business interfere with it in the mornings. I find the game of the utmost benefit to my health and appetite; otherwise I should not give so much time to it. I am not quite sure that Derriford has not got rather an exaggerated idea of his own form; he is certainly very good on his day, but it is by no means always his day. He is not what I should call a very consistent player.

Mr. Brookes and the Derrifords are to dine with

## The One Before

us to-night. I do not altogether approve of Mr. Brookes. There are some queer stories told about him, and on one occasion he was distinctly rude to me personally. It was Mary who suggested the dinner, and I felt sure she would not like me to object. It may be, as she says, that it is worth while to make almost any sacrifice to avoid that most odious form of quarrel—the family quarrel. It may be also, as she says, that I somewhat misunderstood young James Havern. Mr. Brookes is certainly more civil than I have known him to be before. I keep up my authority most strictly in a general way, but in these details it seems from experience that things work out more pleasantly if Mary is allowed to manage them herself. After all, I have other things to do. This is so much the case that in future I intend to abbreviate this diary considerably, and only record really important matters. Mary thinks it quite right that many minor points with which I used to concern myself should be relegated to her entirely. A man has business, or his golf, or some other matter that requires his attention, without fussing about the house. There is some truth in this, perhaps; in any case, Mary has made it quite clear that she prefers that it should be so.

\* \* \* \* \*

## The One Before

At dinner last night Derriford confessed that he could no longer give me a stroke a hole. I have seen this myself for some days past.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the new arrangement we halved the first five. Then Derriford's luck went wrong. He was in every bunker, broke his favourite club, and lost his ball. I won by two holes. He seemed annoyed, and wished to play it again to-morrow before breakfast. To this I have agreed.



## CHAPTER XIII

REBECCA (wife of E. Carcow, dealer in objects of art—and most other things) sat in a small, stuffy, overcrowded room, finishing her supper. The table-cloth was spread at her end of the table; at the other end sat her husband, who was taking no part in the supper. He ate little, and never at regular and stated times. He was letting the water drip slowly into his absinthe, and smoking a fifteen-centime Belgian cigar, on which duty had not been paid. Mrs. Carcow did not object to the smell of tobacco, even at meal-times; and it would have been all the same if Mrs. Carcow had objected with all the vehemence of which she was at times capable.

She was an untidy, rather greasy woman, and she was engaged upon an untidy and very greasy supper. She had been at the age of eighteen, when Carcow married her, distinctly good-looking. After marriage she had rapidly attained a state of permanent over-ripeness. Her figure was unrestrained, and her chins numerous. Her hair was still black; her eyes had been beautiful once, at the time when her face had been thinner; her mouth was widely and generously apolo-

## The One Before

getic. She was a sentimentalist with a strong business instinct—a very common combination. She was supping in the loose gown that she had breakfasted in. Money to Carcow meant extension of business; the idea of making his private life more comfortable and luxurious had never entered his head.

“I say again, advertise,” she said. “Put it in the



local Shalton paper. Something like this: ‘Lost! A ring, of gold and bronze, design of snakes, curious inscription, believed to be Chinese. A reward of five

## The One Before

pounds will be paid to any person bringing it——' and so on."

"You are talking like a fool, Rebecca," said Car-cow, without passion, as he slowly sipped his absinthe. "I tell you things plainly, and even then you do not see them."

"And perhaps——well, you tell me why I am a fool. Then I shall become wiser, no doubt. I want the Sahib-i-dírína as much as you do, and the five thousand also; but for all that, I do not see the sense of throwing away money and time. We are busy in the shop. There are always Americans every day. Sometimes you cannot be there; if I am away too, then we lose money. Now, an advertisement—that risks little."

"Still more folly. If I advertise, the lady will not give up the ring. Smythe would have had it if she would have given it up. We are not the only people in England who are looking for the Sahib-i-dírína. I was made to instruct four people myself. True, if they find it, and send it to Bussorah, I have my commission. But I am not going for a little commission; I am going for the five thousand pounds. And it is likely that there are many more of whom we know nothing who are also looking for the ring. That advertisement would tell them that some one believes that the ring is in Shalton or near it. They may squeeze in in front

## The One Before

of me. And then my pains are wasted; I do not even get my small commission. No; I know something, and I am not giving it away to strangers. I go for the five thousand."

"And the shop?"

"Bah! When do I go out? Almost never. If it is necessary, I can have your brother. He will be safe; for I know so much about him that he is a little frightened."

"That is an innocent lamb, and has done no wrong, though many lies are told about him. He will treat us fairly if you keep an eye on him, and he is, besides, the best salesman in London. If I go, what is it you want me to do?"

"What you were doing when I married you. You take a nice big room in a good place for the business, and also a small bedroom anywhere. You are Madame Fortunata, the renowned palmist. You advertise in the papers. You have bills out likewise. Your fees are pretty high, since you do not wish to waste your time on servants. You tell character only, for the police might make a bother, and you do not want your name to appear. (Besides, it is not as if you were depending on this for a living.) The ladies will flock to you. They take off their gloves, and put their hands on the cushion under the lamp. If on one hand you find the ring, you follow the lady. You tell

## The One Before

me where she lives, and all that you can find out about her. I do not ask you to try to get the ring away from her,—that is my work; you leave that to me. Once you find it, I give you a velvet dress. I give you anything you like. Now, then—you can do it?”

“Oh yes, I can do it. I can read the hands all right. But if I never see the ring?”

“That may very well be. I am not mad. I do not expect that every lady in Shalton will come to you. But see—this is a woman who is very fond of a ring with quaint snakes on it and an inscription—which she cannot understand. That is the kind of woman that comes to have her hand read. I know that type of fool just like my pocket. Still, if she does not come, I have other cards to play. You will stay at Shalton for a fortnight, and then, if you have seen nothing, you come home again.”

“Very well, Ezra my dear, I go. And I waste my time.”

“Five thousand pounds!” exclaimed Carcow. “If we both of us waste ten fortnights—twenty fortnights—and get five thousand in the end, does that matter?”

He finished his absinthe, put the bottle back in the cupboard, and locked it up. “I am tired,” he said. “I worry too much. I go to bed.”

A few nights later, in their room under Mr. Barley’s roof, Jane and Ellen (also known as Maudie) finished

## The One Before

a light repast of mixed biscuits and paregoric lozenges, while Ellen narrated her extraordinary story, and Jane commented thereon.

“For a girl like you, Maudie, making but twenty-



"ALONG OF A BILL THAT  
WAS SHOVED INTO THE  
LETTER-BOX"

two pounds a year, to go and throw away ten shillings on a thing like that,—I call it downright wicked. However did you come to do it?"

“Along of a bill that was shoved into the letter-box.

## The One Before

I just kept it to look at, not taking it in with the letters, because, of course, they don't want no advertisements. That said as Madame Fortunata were a world-renowned palmist and mystic, and were in Shalton for a few days, at a room over Mr. Borkin's in the 'Igh Street. Then there were a lot about some people having wonderful powers as might make their fortunes, if they only knew they had 'em, and that was how Madame Fortunata had always done. And testimonials to prove it too, though the names left blank out of secrecy. I turned it over in my head, and I thought to myself that I should just like to hear what she had to say about me. The price was stiff, ten shillings being the lowest. But then I'd just got my month's money, and of course any one with them out-of-the-way gifts like Madame Fortunata, isn't going to work for nothing. I didn't say a word about it to you, nor to Mrs. Dawes neither, for I knew you would put me off. But next day, being my afternoon, I went there, bold as brass."

"Well," said Jane, virtuously, "you know what the Book says about witchcraft."

"Witchcraft, my aunt!" said Maudie, elegantly. "That Madame Fortunata's no witch. Why, she's a great fat woman. Dressed a good deal for show, I thought. And if the stones was real in them rings she was wearing, they was a king's ransom, I says. 'Can

## The One Before

I have my hands done? I've got the money with me.' She says that certainly I could. I had to set down against a table, and put my hands on a pink cushion, just under the lamp which she lit, though it was broad daylight. There was nothing stand-offish about her, and she talked to me, and I to her, while she was get-



ting things ready. Then she started, going over the lines with a ivory penholder; and it was an absolute miracle. She'd got me just as if she'd known me all her life. My own mother couldn't have done it better. 'You are in domestic service,' she said; 'but you are too good for it, and I see here qualities which should place you in a very different position. You have some special reason for coming to see me, and it is connected with some wish or ambition that you have very

## The One Before

much at heart.'—How they know these things is what gets me—' You are exceedingly ambitious, and you have good reasons to be. You have pride and great discretion; you could be trusted to keep a secret. You are fond of your freedom and independence, and, though you are attractive to the opposite sex, you remain cold to them.' You know what a blooming icicle I am with men yourself, don't you? And so she went on, and every bit of it as true as truth. She said I had been in danger from fire, and I was just going to tell her that it was wrong there, when it flashed across my mind about that lamp going over in the kitchen a fortnight ago. After that I felt she knew all about me; it was as if she could see through and through me. There was lots more, and I don't remember all of it. When she had finished I paid her the money, and said it was all very good, but I should have liked to hear something about the future. She said as she were not allowed by law to tell that for money, but she said as she wouldn't mind telling me gratis that I had nothing to fear, for I had long life before me, and only one serious illness. And it would be lucky for me to wear a ring of mixed metals—gold and silver or silver and copper. 'Perhaps your lady wears one,' she said. 'Not she,' I says; for you know as I'm one to keep up the credit of a place where I am. 'Real gold and real diamonds is what she wears,

## The One Before

and nothing else—leastwise not in the way of rings.' Never come into my mind till afterwards that she does wear a ring of mixed metals, after all—you know—that little thing that Mr. 'Avern gave her. Then I came away."

"And you've wasted your money."

"It's ten shillings gone, of course. But I never knew before what a world of wonders this is. Oh, you did ought to go and see what she says about you! It is encouraging, you know."

"Not if I was the Bank of England twice over I wouldn't do such a thing, for I don't hold with it. And, even if I did, any money as I can put by will come in nicely when me and George——"

"There's your blooming George again. It's just as if you couldn't keep him out of your head a minute."

"P'r'aps I can't; p'r'aps I don't want to."

"Well, sooner you than me. I knows a bit too much about men."

"You don't know anything against George. Nor you don't know anything against Mr. 'Icks, either, if only you'd listen to the voice of your 'eart, instead of taking up with socialism and witches."

"It's no good for Mr. 'Icks to get you to speak for him, nor Mrs. Dawes neither. I've give him my answer once for all, and he knows it."

"That was a cruel thing. You didn't see him as

## The One Before

he was that next Sunday afternoon, when he came up with a letter from Mrs. Derriford. You was out. His face was a ghastly, deathly white, and his spirits was all gone to nothing. He didn't speak much. He pulled a small cucumber out of his breast-pocket, and handed it to Mrs. Dawes. 'She's partial to 'em,' 'e says, in a melancholy way, not mentioning your name, though of course Mrs. Dawes knew. 'Shall I say as it's a present from you, Mr. 'Icks?' she says. He just shook his head. 'Say a gift from a friend,' 'e said. 'No good to mention my name.' There's heaps of



## The One Before

other girls would marry him, for he's not too old, though old enough to be steady; besides, he's a clever gardener, and makes good money. But he won't look at any of 'em. I've seen him of a Sunday, setting all alone up at the cemingtery, smoking his pipe and reading the paper. Oh, that sort of thing makes my heart bleed. And as for asking me to speak for him, he wouldn't dream of it."

"And it wouldn't be any good if he did."

"I only hope as you may live to change your mind. Strange things does happen in that way. Look at His Royal Highness Mr. Ernest Saunders Barley, Esquire."

"Yes, she's boss now. But then, look at the years as she's been put upon. And it may change round again yet. No, there's too much uncertainty about marriage."

"She's a bit different too," said Jane.

"Yes, there is a something; you can't hardly say what it is. There's a look in her eye, and there's a way of speaking."

"She's as pleasant-spoken as ever she was," said Jane.

"I don't say she ain't, but there's a way with her. You has a feeling that she could speak very different if there were reason, and pretty nigh take the skin off you. If there is anything wrong—and that don't happen often in my work—I don't make no excuses. She

## The One Before

used to look at you; now she looks right through you. Now, ain't it so?"

"It's something or other anyhow. She don't make no threats, and yet I knows that if the silver weren't up to the mark she'd think nothing of giving me the sack. Never worked so hard since I've been here, and that's a fact. It wouldn't suit my book to have to go. I'm comfortable enough, and I don't want another change for the short time afore me and George are married."

"And I don't want to leave neither, not until Mrs. Dawes has taught me all that she knows. I'd sooner have it as it is than like it was when he was always hanging round, and wanting to know what you did with small bits of string from parcels, and saying as he wouldn't have them wasted. He was a corker. What I say is that I can make allowances for anything except worrying and wangling."

"Well, there's something in that." Jane paused before the looking-glass and tried an effect. "I say, Maudie, how'd you like me with my 'air like that?"

"Oh, a treat!" said Maudie. "You looks like the Queen of nothing."

## CHAPTER XIV

*Extracts from a letter from Nathaniel Brookes to his nephew James Havern.*

You are by this time very savage that I have not written to you before to report progress. It is a case where no news is good news, but undoubtedly I should have written sooner but for the fact that I find writing such disgusting and laborious work. If I'd only got my secretary down here, it would be different. He would take me down in shorthand, transcribe me, punctuate me, make the requisite repairs in my grammar, address me and stamp me, and save me a mint of trouble. I'm afraid I should not have thought of writing now even, but that it seemed a more desirable occupation than watching a contest at the royal and idiotic game of golf between my cheerful host and——

Can you guess the name? Ernest Saunders Barley. And that's a fact, Jimmy. Ernest Saunders is converted into a golf maniac and quite unrecognizable. And it's the blessed work, indirectly, of The One Before.

The lion-tamer was a man of strong, almost mes-

## The One Before

meric, personal influence, and Mary has inherited it. She has made an improved version of Ernest Saunders. He is still ridiculous in many ways, and always will be, but the domestic pettifogger and tyrant has vanished. "Mary seems to wish it," is a final argument with him now. The Hortus Siccus has been destroyed. The fret-saw is laid aside; to my knowledge he has not made one filthy and ineffective paper-knife or one putrid and untrustworthy bracket since I've been here. I've grave doubts if he could tell you offhand the exact price of his breakfast bacon. He let Johnnie Derriford give him one lesson in golf, and since then golf has marked him for its own. The original lesson was because "Mary seemed to wish it," but golf itself has gone on with the good work. Derriford tells me that he's by no means a bad player, considering how short a time he has been at it. He plays every day, and is inclined to talk it in the intervals; but I've known better men than him to be thus afflicted. The out-of-door exercise has done his health good, and by mixing more with other men and different sorts of men, he has gained more sense of proportion. He is even beginning to spend some of his money—I fancy that "Mary seemed to wish it." He is going to embark on a carriage—Johnson would never pass that sentence—and is at present modernizing his stables under Derriford's directions.

## The One Before

The changes in Mary—the direct result of The One Before—are less remarked, but not less remarkable. That quality of domination, which she has acquired from my old friend the lion-tamer, shows itself in subtle ways, in a look of the eyes, in an inflection of the



voice, in a quickness of decision and an absence of timidity; and naturally in ordinary social converse it has no occasion to show itself at all. But they chaff her about her sudden craze for animals—she even made friends with a performing bear that two abominable French scoundrels were dragging round the place. So far as her complete ascendancy over Ernest Saunders goes, they have probably got some vague idea that she has asserted herself. But it certainly has not

## The One Before

occurred to them that she has become to a great extent somebody else altogether.

Well, Mary did her duty to a member of the family and asked me to dinner. I fancy her distrust of me has diminished rather; more probably because I am a friend of the Derrifords' than for any merits of my own. Ernest Saunders follows her lead. Also he regards me with pity because I don't play golf. And I regard him with contempt; and we're both very civil to each other. After dinner we had one of those weird card games that they have in the provinces; you've never heard of it before, but they tell you that you'll soon pick it up. The chief point of this game seemed to be that every three minutes everybody had to pay Ernest Saunders six fish-counters, which seemed to give him a good deal of pleasure. I lost my head (through excitement) and gambled like a madman—thereby, I am sure, incurring Mary's gravest suspicions. And the more heavily I plunged the more luck went against me. By the end of the game I felt as if I had lost my entire fortune twice over, and the only thing to do was to go home and blow my brains out. I had run through no less than two hundred and ninety-eight fish-counters. This, by the way, represents in cash six shillings and twopence-halfpenny. Ernest Saunders said he had never seen anything like it before. One talks all the time, and it's a nice bright game. I must

## The One Before

teach it them up at the Club. It's a pity I've forgotten the name of it.

Well, you see, The One Before is doing an excellent work. In fact, the work is done. The spell has been broken, and Ernest Saunders would never get back to his old position as penny domestic tyrant and general nuisance. I return to London next week. I was extremely glad to see the Derrifords again, and they've done everything to make my stay pleasant, but the provinces are the provinces, and I'm too old to learn the way of them. It's all right for a while, but I'm not equal to much effort, and Paris, London, and Central Africa are the only places where you can really rest. I will bore you further on this point when I see you. But I have already written at an unconscionable length, and there is still another point to touch on, one of more personal interest to you.

Hilda Derriford is well. I would add that she is beautiful, but I remember that you have already remarked that. So also has her father. "I want Hilda's portrait painted," he said to me. "She will be in London this winter, stopping with her aunt, and it would be a good opportunity." I agreed with him, and asked him if he had any particular artist in his mind. "Well," he said, "that was where I wanted your advice. I don't want one of the highest-price ones. I've lived a long time, and I've looked at the

## The One Before

public sales. It's a dangerous thing for a man who isn't right in the know to give a very long price for a portrait by a modern artist. I want a man who is going to get the big prices one day. If he does, then people say that Johnnie Derriford ain't such a fool as he looks. If he doesn't, then there's no great harm done." It was not, perhaps, the highest point of view to take in a matter of the kind. But then Derriford is the kind of man who would cheerfully spend a hundred pounds to save himself from being done out of a penny; few men who are so open-handed are also so shrewd. Well, I gave him a few names of coming men who would be suited with such a subject; of course your own name was on the tip of my tongue, and equally of course I had the decency not to mention it. But old Derriford did. "The man I was thinking about," he said, "was Jimmy Havern. He gets things like. I remember his Lady Harston in the Academy, and he'd got the old witch to the life. Then the papers talked about him as if he were going to be somebody. But of course he hasn't a studio in London, and since his Academy success I suppose he wouldn't look at a commission for a full length under seven hundred." I told him that you had a studio in Tite Street now, and he took down the address, remarking that it could do no harm to write and ask. If he does, your natural inclination will be to fake up some ingenious

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arrangement by which you paint the portrait for nothing, and make him a present of it. Don't do that. Derriford wouldn't have it.

Didn't you rather give me the impression that Hilda was very proud? I should like to point out that the appearance of extreme pride is often the result of extreme shyness. I could tell you a great deal more about that young lady; but I shan't.

I had thought of stealing The One Before before leaving. But I have promised to come back later for a day or two with the partridges, and I can do it then. And I think this about enough letter-writing for the present.

## CHAPTER XV

REBECCA stood in the big room over Borkin's shop in the High Street, and looked pensively out of the window. It was her last afternoon in Shalton as Madame Fortunata, and so far she had not found the ring. Otherwise the palmistry had been very fairly successful, far more so than in the days of her early struggles, when her fees had been much lower and her need for money had been more immediate and pressing. She even felt a mild satisfaction that she had not found the ring. Ezra should have taken her advice and advertised. If she had found it, the satisfaction would have been more full and material, but she had proved herself right; she had also made between four and five pounds when all her expenses were cleared, and she did not propose to hand that over to Ezra, not, at least, if she could help it. As a matter of fact, Rebecca knew little or nothing about palmistry, but she was shrewd at forming a rapid estimate of any one at first sight, and she had also found unexpected assistance from the fact that Borkin was a photographer.

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She had read Borkin's hand for nothing on the first day that she started business, and had told him that he ought to have been an artist. Mr. Borkin said he was well aware of it, and seemed pleased. He showed her some of his recent work, photographs of local people, and chattered about them. Rebecca had an excellent memory, and, thanks to that chatter, was later enabled to do what appeared to be miracles, so that her fame became great in Shalton. She had a stock of useful phrases to suit most cases; and she was well aware that her clients did not want to be told that their character was what it was, but that it was what they would like it to be. The accusation of remarkable ambition or a strong will was always welcomed.

As she stood looking out of the window a carriage drove up, and presently two ladies—Hilda and Mrs. Barley, to be precise—were shown in.

"This lady wishes to have her hand read," said Mrs. Barley; "and I should like to stop and hear how it's done. Is that all right, or shall I be in the way?"

"Not in the least in the way, madame. Pray be seated. Perhaps you will be tempted to have your own hand read afterwards."

"I don't think that's very likely; but thanks. Take off your gloves, Hilda. Which hand do you want, Madame Fortunata?"



**SHE HAD READ BORKIN'S HAND.**



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"Both hands, if you please."

Hilda spread out her two pretty hands on the cushion under the lamp, and Madame Fortunata went over them carefully.

Borkin had shown Rebecca a charming portrait of Hilda, of which he was very proud, and had mentioned



that it was a queer thing that she was not engaged. That was all that Rebecca had to go on; but it was more than she generally had.

"A most interesting hand," she said. "I see that you had some special reason for coming to see me, and it is connected with some ambition or some wish that you have very much at heart." From the corner

## The One Before

of her cunning eye Rebecca noticed that the young girl blushed slightly. "It is a wish," she repeated, "that you have very much at heart. You are not married. Why, this is very strange, you are not even engaged. You are extremely attractive to the other sex, far more so than you suppose, but you are not vain, and care far less for general admiration than for more important things. You have pride and great discretion; you could be trusted to keep a secret. In some matters you carry your reserve to excess; you should be warned of this, for it may be against your interests. I am not allowed to tell you the future, or else——"

"Oh, please do!" exclaimed Hilda.

"Yes, let us hear it," said Mary. "We won't tell anybody."

"Your hand indicates that you will be engaged before the end of the year."

"Is that all?" said Hilda.

"No," said Madame Fortunata; "that is not all. After you are engaged, you will try to break off the engagement."

"I am quite sure I shouldn't," exclaimed Hilda. Then she realized that she had implied more than she intended. Mary smiled sweetly and provokingly.

"You see what I mean," said Hilda.

## The One Before

"Oh, quite, quite!" said Mary.

"Don't be horrible. I only mean that I never change my mind after I have once decided anything. Isn't that so, Madame Fortunata? Isn't that written in my hand?"

"Certainly. I see here that you are a lady with a great independence of thought. You take your own line and you keep it. But in an affair of the heart you would be guided solely by the heart." This last was a pleasing sentence of which she had professionally made frequent use. She proceeded to give Hilda a little more for her money, endowing her with a keenly logical mind and remarkable powers of organization. She was just observing that if Hilda had been a man she would have had great success as an electrical engineer, when Mary rose and came to the table.

"Look at my hand beside yours, Hilda," she said, drawing off her right glove. "Mine looks absolutely brown."

"A very interesting hand," said Madame Fortunata. "It would be a pleasure if madame would change her mind, and take off the other glove too. I feel sure I could give you satisfaction."

"No; thanks," said Mary, putting on her glove again.

If Mary had happened to remove her other glove,

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Rebecca Carcow would have found The One Before, for it was on her left hand that Mary wore the ring.

Rebecca waddled to the window, and watched the carriage drive off with her two clients inside; she watched it pensively and complacently. Had she known, in a state of the wildest excitement, with all the blood to her head, she would have been avalanching down the staircase, prepared to follow that carriage to its destination, even if she had to die—or take a two-shilling cab—in the attempt. As it was, she went to the mirror and patted her fat limp hair, and powdered her fat limp cheeks, for she had been bidden by Mr. Borkin to a farewell banquet—a tea in what he invariably called the “stoodio.”

In the carriage, Hilda said that it was certainly very curious.

“Many of the things she said were absolutely right. I’m glad I saw her circular.”

“Of course, my dear,” said Mary. “But it’s rubbish all the same.”

“Well, how could she have known that I was not engaged? Really, I’m not so ugly as all that.”

“No, you’re so pretty that I was surprised she said that. But put another question. Can you believe that when a girl accepts a proposal that makes a change in the lines of her hand?”

## The One Before

"I suppose not. Do you know that you have changed a good deal of late?"

"Really! How?"

"I don't know exactly. You're more authoritative



—much more. You used to be rather timid and concessional with strangers. A month ago you would have been more apologetic to that fat woman, and

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you would have given way when she bothered you to have your hand read."

"Should I?" said Mary. "Well, I suppose I've seen the error of my ways."

But that explanation did not satisfy Hilda. Nor did it satisfy Mary, who became somewhat thoughtful as the carriage rolled on to fetch Ernest Saunders Barley, muddy and triumphant, from the golf-links.

## CHAPTER XVI

MR. NATHANIEL BROOKES was not in a good temper. His morning letters had not pleased him. Tarver had annoyed him. When he went into the library he found his secretary, Mr. Johnson, irritatingly grammatical and exasperatingly polite.

After a brief salutation, Mr. Brookes began to dictate his replies to those letters.

"This is to those incompetent swindlers, Jordan and Sage, who've made a mess of the maps for my book. Take down, please."

The tone was peremptory, and the spotty but conscientious Mr. Johnson raised his eyebrows, and looked like a wounded leopard.

Mr. Brookes began: "Dear Sirs, I return the rubbish received from you this morning. I require maps which are clear, accurate, and in accordance with my instructions; and I have no use for this nonsense. Should you happen to have any one in your employ who is not a drunkard, or a cretin, or both, pray let him try to carry out the work, and with as little delay as possible. If not, I have only to say that I will not

## The One Before

accept the so-called maps enclosed, nor will I pay for them. And I am surprised—— Good Heavens!" He stopped abruptly, with one hand to his forehead.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mr. Johnson.

"It's nothing. Put that letter aside for a moment. I've just recalled something that I wished to say to you. You remember a passage in the book which deals with the Sahib-i-dírína?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Brookes. Certain parts of it had to be deleted."

"Well, it has all got to be deleted. Every reference and allusion to the Sahib-i-dírína is to be cut out. Understand?"

"I understand, of course. I should not have thought that necessary, and I should not have supposed that I had allowed anything to remain that was improper or indiscreet."

"Nobody's asking you what you thought, or supposed, or allowed." Mr. Brookes was certainly not in a good temper this morning. "I'm telling you what you're to do. Every line that refers to the Sahib-i-dírína is to be omitted. Secondly, have you said anything at all about that subject to anybody?"

"Have you ever known me, Mr. Brookes, to fail in the slightest degree to justify the confidence with which you have hitherto honoured me?"

The stateliness of that speech was absurdly out of

## The One Before

proportion to the speaker, and if Mr. Brookes had not already been angry he might have been amused. He now became more angry.

"Don't talk to me like some fool on the stage. Give me a plain answer to my question."

Mr. Johnson was also rather angry, and rather



frightened besides. But the stateliness of his diction still held out.

"I have never communicated any of your business to anybody, Mr. Brookes, and I never shall. I hope that this plain statement may save me from any offensive remarks and questions of this kind in the future."

He sat aghast at his own temerity.

Mr. Brookes changed his manner suddenly. He no longer looked angry or raised his voice when he

## The One Before

spoke. He was quiet, and he smiled gently and sweetly. But he was somewhat grim all the same.

"Am I offensive to you, Mr. Jackson? Then I must apologize indeed. I mentioned to you a certain matter some time ago—it seemed then to be of no earthly importance;—if you had passed it on to every Tom, Dick, and Harry of your acquaintance, it would not—so I thought then—have mattered. I should not have cared two straws. If, as I suppose, you are fond of boring your friends, it would even have been natural. But when I found that this was a matter where thousands of pounds—and some graver interests still—were involved, I ventured to plead for your discretion. So that offends you, Mr. Jimson! Well, well——"

"My name is not Jackson or Jimson," said the lacerated secretary. "It is Johnson, as you know perfectly well. And I do not think your account of your case is entirely accurate."

"Really, Mr. Jobson? (You did say 'Jobson,' didn't you?) Let's see how we stand, then. I say that there are certain people who would pay thousands to get this ring, the Sahib-i-dirína—who would go further even than that. For that reason I directed you not to talk about it. You tell me the statement is a lie, and the direction is offensive. Now, taking your word for this——"

## The One Before

"I never said it. You choose to misconstrue me, Mr. Brookes. However, it is of no use to argue the point. I'm quite resigned."

"Really?" said Mr. Brookes. "Then I accept your resignation. Fill up a cheque now for any sum that may be due to you, including what is customary in lieu of notice, and bring it to me to sign in the next room. There's not room in this flat for two people with tempers, and I happen to have a temper myself. You are an admirable secretary, and I shall be glad to say so in a testimonial; and I quite realize that I have brought your resignation on myself, and have only myself to blame. People who have bad tempers, like myself, always have to suffer for it. Be as quick as you can with the cheque, by the way." And Mr. Brookes moved towards the door into the other room.

"I had no intention of resigning, sir," said Johnson, staring helplessly. "It is a misunderstanding, and I could easily explain it; I never meant to resign."

"No?" said Mr. Brookes, in the open doorway. "I look at it from your point of view entirely. It would be better for you to say that you resigned the post in consequence of my temper than for me to say—something different."

"Very well, sir. I will make out the cheque. I am paid monthly, but I think a quarter's notice would

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be customary—the monthly payment being merely a special arrangement in my case that you kindly consented to——”

“All right, all right,” said Mr. Brookes, impatiently.

“There are also a few little things of my own that I should wish to get together before I leave.”

“Do so as quickly as possible, Mr.—er—Marlowe. When one has to bear a loss like this, it is the time of waiting which tries one. The actual bereavement—but, however——” And Mr. Brookes passed abruptly into the next room, closing the door behind him.

It is perfectly true that Mr. Johnson was ridiculous, and stately, and nicely educated. It cannot be denied that his ideals were not of the highest, and that he had a keen eye for the main chance, or at least for the monetary side of it. But his ideals were not entirely his own fault, and regard for money is very much a matter of income. The people who have little think much of little; the people who have more think less of little. It may be added that the people who have most think most of little—in many cases, at any rate—but the fact remains that Mr. Brookes could afford to dismiss with impatient contempt a sum which seemed almost a question of life or death to his secretary.

Mr. Brookes, on the other hand, was a gentle and just man, but in this matter he had neither behaved

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like a gentleman nor like an ordinarily fair man. One should not take that advantage of life's handicap, and bad temper makes fools of the best of us. Also, time flies, and there are several other copy-book headings, if space permitted quotation; but it may be doubted nowadays, if the most devoted lover of Dickens can read the scene in which Eugene Wrayburn triumphs over the schoolmaster with entire satisfaction. One may admire the conflict of wits, equally placed; but the triumph of the bolder over the fool is a sorry business. And it may have been that some such thought occurred to Mr. Brookes, for he sat down and wrote a letter to his friend, Sir Thomas Folmersham, F.R.S., recommending in the highest possible terms his late secretary. Mr. Brookes added that the fault which had led to their separation was entirely his own fault, and that he felt compelled to say that Johnson was quite justified in resigning his post.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Brookes was suffering from a twinge of conscience, and in less than a week that eminent authority on primitive people, Sir Thomas Folmersham, F.R.S., had engaged Mr. Johnson at a higher salary than he had hitherto received.

Every wrong (to refer back to the copy-book again) brings with it its own punishment; it may be added that it frequently leaves it at the wrong house. The wrong that Mr. Brookes had done might have resulted

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in his grave moral deterioration, but it did not; it resulted in the grave and moral deterioration of Mr. Johnson.

To fill up the cheque and get his things together took Johnson precisely two minutes. But nearly a quarter of an hour had elapsed before he presented the cheque to Mr. Brookes for his signature.

"I was unable to put my hand on a note-book of mine," said Johnson, meekly and mendaciously, as he apologized for the delay.

As a matter of fact, he had been occupying his time in making a rapid shorthand note of those passages in the book which referred to the Sahib-i-dírína. He might, or might not, be able to make use of them by way of vengeance on Mr. Brookes and remuneration for himself. He was by no means sure that Mr.

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Brookes had spoken the truth when he said that thousands of pounds were involved. But he took his treacherous chance, together with a cheque for a quarter's salary, and an introductory letter to Sir Thomas Folmersham.



## CHAPTER XVII

ON the night of her return to London Rebecca sat in the stuffy little room and discussed matters with her husband. He took his disappointment philosophically, raking his unkempt beard with his yellow fingers, deeply meditative.

"After all," he cried, "there is no money lost. It is one card played—but I have more. Now I play the next."

"If you had only taken my advice from the first, and put in the advertisement——"

"Ah! Hold your tongue!" he interrupted. "Am I a fool that I should tell the others where to look for the Sahib-i-dírína?" He took the absinthe bottle from the cupboard, and prepared his opalescent poison with loving care. "Remember, I do not know how many are looking for the ring. At times I see thousands of them; when I dream at night I see some one get before me."

"It is because you drink too much of that," said Rebecca, placidly.

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"You will mind your own business. That is a weakness of your family, Rebecca. Your brother also——"

"You were glad to have Nathan to help you while I was away."

"Your brother is a dirty thief, if you wish to know."



"Why should you say that? Nathan is a poor boy that is not understood."

"Well, I show you that I understand him very well. And to begin, he is not a boy. He is nearly thirty, and he knows rather more than a little boy, your brother Nathan. Perhaps he has not taken much from me—maybe some cigarettes, maybe a few stamps, perhaps a little pin for the necktie that is not of value. He knows that I know something, and he

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is careful. I say he is a dirty thief, all the same. Look for yourself." Carcow gesticulated from the wrist, with the palms upwards. "He wears a better coat in the shop than I could at Buckingham Palace. He has patent boots and a silk hat and embroidered satin braces—all very good. His watch and chain—I will lend ten pounds on them and take no risk. He has a club; he plays billiards; he goes to theatres; he backs non-starters; he has all such luxuries. He never thinks twice of a week-end at Brighton; he takes cabs when he could walk; he sucks musk lozenges, and puts scented stuff on his hair. All of that is money, money, money! And where does it come from? Is he a solid man like me, with a good business, with some capital in it? No. Nor does he work if he can help it."

"He would work if he could find anything that really suited him. In all London there is not a better salesman."

"He can sell anything; I know that well. I am not telling you he is a fool—I am telling you he is a thief; and I wish I knew how he did it. He was sharp enough when you were away. Neither of us, I know, has breathed a word to him about the Sahib-i-dírína. But he knows we have some big business on. I could see he knew, and that he would like to have a finger in it."

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"I told him it was my health—the shortness of breath again—and that the doctor had made you send me away a little."

"Yes, and I told him the same story; and do you know what he said? He said, 'Rats!' When I asked him why he mentioned those vermin, and what he was thinking, he said it was a funny thing he was not told where you had gone; so I told him at once you had gone to Hastings. Then he asked for the address. No, he is not honest, your brother Nathan; he is a dirty thief; but he is sharp enough, and he suspects we have something on. The day after to-morrow I go down to Shalton, and I play my second card, which will perhaps take the trick. I leave you with him. You want to have your eyes open, and to tell him nothing at all."

"I shall be careful," said Rebecca. "I have a great love and affection for Nathan, and I do not like to hear people speak ill of him. It would be wrong for me to put temptation in his way. The Sahib-i-dírína is ours—we have heard of its value, and he has not—we know where to look for it, and he does not. If by any chance he got it away from us, though he is my own brother and I love him, I would spit in his face and never speak to him again. Ezra, you will not have another absinthe to-night, will you?"

"You will mind your own business," said Ezra, as

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he placed the spoon carefully in position. "That will give you enough to do. You will tell Nathan that I have gone to attend some sales in the country. If he wishes to know more, you can say that is all I have told you—which will be true. And you watch him as a cat watches a mouse."

"Nathan is a very good boy in many ways, and he is a clever boy too. But he is not clever enough to get over me. Five thousand pounds—no; that is not for Nathan."

A few days later Rebecca had some occasion to doubt her perfect security. Nathan was in charge of the shop, and he had had a fairly good morning. He had sold three people things which they did not want, at prices which they could not afford to pay, prices largely in excess of the value of their purchases. And he had sent them all away with the conviction that they had done well for themselves, and got the better of the resplendent young man behind the counter. He now stood in the doorway of the shop, smoking one of Carcow's cigarettes, and surveying the street. But for the fact that he had bulbous eyes, a pronounced nose, and a greedy mouth, he would have been distinctly a good-looking young man. To him approached, hesitatingly, a small telegraph-boy.

"Carcow?" said Nathan, sharply.

"Mrs. Carcow," said the boy.

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"Right. Give it here." He spoke dictatorially. As it was his profession to be servile, so it was to his recreation to be dictatorial when safe occasions offered.

The envelope was addressed to Mrs. Carcow; but Nathan tore it open. The telegram had been handed in at the Shalton Post-office, contained the single word, "Found," and was signed, "Ezra."

"There's no answer. Be off with you," said Nathan, and took the telegram through to the little room at the back of the shop, where Mrs. Carcow was concocting one of this year's out of two of last year's. In matters of her wardrobe she loved show and economy.



"Rebecca, my dear," said Nathan, "I opened this by mistake. I was expecting a telegram from a cus-

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tomer who was thinking of buying some enamels, and I only noticed the name Carcow. But I am very sorry; I hope there is no harm done."

"Well, I wish you would not open things that are not meant for you." She glanced through it and flung it aside. "It is nothing."

"Eh? Well, that is not like Ezra. He does not telegraph for nothing—not usually."

"I suppose you want to know all about it?" said Rebecca, bitterly.

"Not at all," said Nathan, meekly. "If he has some business that he does not wish me to know about, that is all right."

"It's nothing to do with business. He wrote to me to send on his pocket-book. I wrote back that I knew he had taken it with him, and that he must have mislaid it. Well, I was right. Now he telegraphs that he has found the book. That is quite simple—eh?"

It was not bad as an impromptu, perhaps, but it was far from being a perfect lie. Rebecca had, in her time, told many better. Had it been the truth, Ezra, in all probability, would not have telegraphed; if he had, he would have addressed it "Carcow," and not added the "Mrs.;" and, even if he had added the "Mrs.," Rebecca would not have been annoyed at an accidental opening of the telegram. These points occurred to Nathan.

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"Then, it is nothing. I am not curious, and I am not a man that wants a commission out of everything, as Ezra thinks. It is only that I do not like to be mistrusted. I tell you, Rebecca, no one yet has ever lost money by placing confidence in me."

Rebecca said that she knew all about that; and something in her manner seemed to suggest that nobody had lost money on that risk, because nobody had taken the risk. But Nathan did not appear to be offended by her manner. She was lying; he was lying; and each knew the other was lying. But neither thought it worth while to say so. He went on, still in the part of the injured lamb—

"Well, however, I have to go out for an hour. I am to meet a man. He has a gas-stove—something quite new—twenty per cent. less gas and fifty per cent. more heat. If that is right, that will be great business. Then all other gas-stoves will be scrap-iron. There will be this one and no other."

"You were always a great one for gas," said Rebecca, sardonically. "And where do you come in?"

"Well, it is to be a company. I can introduce some friends, if it is worth my while. Oh yes, I put you and Ezra in too! I am not one that wants to keep a good thing all to myself."

If this was said with any idea of arousing the feelings of remorse and generosity in Rebecca, it failed in

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its purpose. Rebecca had a quite sincere affection for Nathan. But with her affection was affection, and business was business. Business was Number One A, and affection came rather lower down in the catalogue. So she said—

“That is right. And you know very well either of us would do as much for you, and be glad of the opportunity.”

Nathan put on his silk hat—a hat of unnatural and suspicious glossiness, and made his way to the Sceptre Club. The Sceptre Club is a new proprietary club. The subscription is low, and there is at present no entrance fee, and it is as near Pall Mall as you have any right to expect for the money. It is entirely free from any of that carping and critical spirit that we regret so much in other clubs; the management sends out its touting circulars from time to time; it goes out into the by-ways and hedges, and compels them to come in. At its birth it sent invitations to sundry celebrities to become life members without money and without price. Celebrities are not always men of the world, and though the majority put the invitation in the waste-paper basket, well knowing that what is offered for nothing is worth just that, a few lent their names. There are nice patient scientific celebrities in the country who hardly know that they are celebrities at all; they took the invitation as a compliment, and

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wrote four-page letters to accept—well-worded letters in the best taste, letters which would look well in a biography. There are also celebrities in London whose arrival is so recent that they are not yet quite convinced, and welcome any confirmation. Their names formed the bait that the proprietor threw out to the smaller fry. It is a wonderful club; it has refused nobody; and yet it has been accepted by quite good people. Its objects are set forth as being social, literary, artistic, scientific, and imperial—that's all. And it has a real committee, though the committee is nothing like as real as the proprietor. If it should ever be your lot to enter the Sceptre Club, you can leave your hat and umbrella in the hall, but I do not recommend that course. There have been one or two little accidents there through carelessness.

Nathan left his sheeny hat and his silver-mounted malacca—by arrangement—in the hall-porter's cupboard. He went on to the reading-room, whose only occupant was a pimply-faced young man who was reading the *Times* with an air of great seriousness. And he was not the inventor of a new gas-stove. Nathan rang the bell; after a few seconds he appeared to grow irritated, and rang it again and more considerably. A waiter in a noisy livery appeared.

“Bring me the atlas,” said Nathan.

## The One Before



“Ver’ sorry,” said the intelligent Swiss, “dere vos no atlas.”

“Well, a map of England would do.”

“I’m afraid dere vos no maps, neither.”

“Go away, then. You’re no use!”

They are really a little too harsh with the waiters at the Sceptre Club. Those waiters should not be made to suffer for the sins of others; they have some of their own.

## The One Before

"Scandalous! Disgraceful! Abominable! No atlas!" Nathan might have been soliloquizing, but he appeared rather to be seeking the sympathy of the pimply stranger.

The stranger was our ambitious young friend Mr. Johnson. The circular had fallen upon him at the critical time when he had plenty of money in his pocket. The circular of the Sceptre Club is most alluring. Johnson felt that he should embrace the opportunity. It was true that he had no friends at the club, but he had friends elsewhere who would be impressed by its note-paper. He was elected by return of post, and had felt rather a dog ever since. Here was an opportunity to make a club acquaintance—an excellent opportunity.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "I don't know if I could be of any assistance, sir. I happen to have rather gone into geography."

"That is very good of you," said Nathan. "I was wanting to know where is a place called Shalton."

"It is a small town in Surrey, not very far from Guildford. You go to it from Waterloo."

"Thanks very much indeed," said Nathan, as he sat down. "Of course every club ought to have an atlas. The fact is, our committee is rather slack."

"It certainly seems an omission," said Johnson. "You could have got it in Bradshaw, of course."

## The One Before

"So I might; of course. Tell me, if I am not taking a liberty, do you know the position of every town in England like that? It seems to me an extraordinary feat of memory."

"I think I know most of them. In this case, I must admit that I had come across Shalton quite recently—well, in connection with rather an interesting affair."

"My business at Shalton is a little out of the way, also," said Nathan.

"This was an affair where thousands of pounds, and, even graver interests were involved. I act as a confidential secretary, and, of course, I cannot speak more fully of matters that come to my knowledge professionally."

"Of course not. Quite right. Very proper. I was just going to take a sherry and bitters before lunch. I wonder if you would do me the honour to join me."

Johnson signified his assent in the usual manner. The prismatic waiter brought the fire-water. Nathan, who appeared to have taken quite a liking to Johnson, chatted freely. He confessed that, as a confidential financial agent, he had frequently to conduct negotiations where many thousands were involved, but he did not allude further to the subject of Johnson's little mystery. Warmed with sherry and gratification, Johnson talked a good deal about himself. The names of

## The One Before

his former and present employers came glibly off his tongue. His intentions in the direction of a University degree were touched on. No, he had not been to the Earl's Court Exhibition yet; he had been sticking hard at work. He assented to Nathan's observation that one must not overdo it; and to the suggestion that they should dine together at Earl's Court on the following night.

"This is just a little bit of sheer luck," said Nathan to himself as he returned to the shop.

The inexplicable absence of the man with the absolutely new gas-stove did not seem to weigh on his mind at all.

"Here you are," said Rebecca. "Well, what about that gas-thing?"

"Nothing settled. I am not satisfied about the patents yet. But it may all come right. Perhaps I have to be away again. When does Ezra come back?"

"It will be to-night or to-morrow morning, I expect."

But Ezra did not return that day or the next. It is one thing to find the Sahib-i-dírína, and another to get possession of it.

## CHAPTER XVIII

MR. CARCOW's method had been simplicity itself. He took down to Shalton with him a small stock of Persian rugs, Benares ware, and more or less Oriental jewellery. He procured the requisite license, and a boy with a handcart to take his goods. He wore his oldest suit of clothes—and they were very old—with one or two added touches, which were intended to suggest the far East. With these he went round to likely houses, and on the second day he arrived at The Chestnuts. The circumstances were narrated by Jane the same evening in the kitchen after supper.

“Just missed getting myself a silver bangle to-day,” she said.

“Ho!” said the sardonic Ellen-Maudie. “I just missed getting myself a couple of di'mond necklaces as well.”

“Now, don't you two girls get sparring,” said the peaceable Mrs. Dawes.

“She won't do no harm, unless she cuts 'erself with being too sharp,” said Jane. “But it's s'truth I did get the offer of that bangle, and a funny thing it

## The One Before

was. I was upstairs this morning when I heard the front. So, of course, I ran down and opened the door, and there were such a queer old man. He'd got



a yellow and red thing round his neck, and he wore one of them red cap things like what natives has."

"Fez is what you mean," said Mrs. Dawes.

"That's it. I had the word on the tip of my tongue. He'd got a boy with a handcart full of things just behind him. 'Good morning, young lady,' he says.

## The One Before

‘Well, yes,’ I says; ‘but the back door’s the place for you; so just you get round there if you want anything.’ With that he just whips some silver bangles out of his pocket, and they looked real good too. ‘I want to do a little business with the lady of the house,’ he says. ‘I come from Persia, and I have brought most beautiful rugs and embroideries with me—all very cheap. Now, if you help me to see the lady of the house, and I sell something, I come round to the back and give you one of these bangles afterwards; any one that you like to choose. I am a man of my word,’ he says. Well, that looked all right, didn’t it? So I said I couldn’t do no more than tell Mrs. Barley, and then it would be for her to say. So I went and told her, putting in one or two things to make her curious like. She said she’d see him in the hall, but I was to stop there too. So I brought him in, and he began to spread his rugs and things out. When he saw her he give a kind of little jump, as if he’d been startled. The missus liked his things, and they did look good too, but the prices—they were something awful. Little bits of rugs, five and seven pounds apiece! And one long rug, what she took to rather, that he said was twenty pounds. ‘Your prices are ridiculous,’ she said. ‘Pack up your things, and go away.’ He said they were beautiful rugs, all silk, and took years to make, but he could not sell



**"WILL YOU GIVE ME THAT LITTLE RING ON YOUR FINGER  
FOR AN EXCHANGE?"**



## The One Before

them, and he could not go on carrying them round. 'Look here, my lady,' he said. 'If I give you the twenty-pound rug, will you give me that little ring on your finger for an exchange? I say it because I am superstitious. If I can get rid of one of these things, then the rest will follow, and all sell as a hot cake.' "

"What ring was it he meant?" asked Mrs. Dawes.

"Why, that one as were give her. It don't look like gold, and it's got no stones in it. I'd be sorry to give ten shillings for it myself. I can't say what the rug was worth, not being familiar with these 'igh-priced antique things, but it was worth a good many times more than the ring—anybody could see that."

"Why, he must have gone clean off his burner," said Maudie, pensively.

"So I thought. And I expected as she'd jump at it. But not she! 'No,' she said. 'I offered you a fair price for the rug, and you wouldn't take it. Now go, and be quick, please. I've nothing more to say to you.' And what come next will surprise you; least-wise, it did me. 'Very well,' he said. 'If I can't sell, and can't exchange, perhaps I can buy.' With that he dived his hand in his pocket, and brought it out full of gold sovereigns. 'If these will not be enough, I have some more,' he said. 'How much for the ring?' Think she'd listen to him? Not a

## The One Before

bit of it. She had him out of the house inside of five seconds. And there was he crying pretty near, and the perspiration starting out on his face, and offering her anything she liked for the ring. And as soon as I'd shut the door, she turned on me, and said I ought to have seen that the man was drunk. I didn't answer her back, but I don't believe as he was drunk. A bit cracked, perhaps."

"These sunstrokes ain't uncommon in foreign parts," said Mrs. Dawes. "And I have heard as that's liable to come on again afterwards. So he wouldn't give you the bangle?"

"I went round to the back, but he never come. That was all right, because he only promised it if he did business."

"Pity he didn't come," said Ellen-Maudie. "He might have took a fancy to my 'air-pins. I'd have sold him the lot for a pound apiece."

"Poor man!" said Jane. "I felt sorry for him. I expect it was one of them sunstrokes. I only hope as he's feeling better now."

"That might be," said Mrs. Dawes, who was the kitchen authority on medical matters. "I've known a case where they passed off quite sudden-like. Other times they leaves a weakness. Well, it should be a lesson to you gels not to go running out with nothing on your heads."

## The One Before

Carcow took his rugs and embroideries back to the little inn where he was staying, and packed them up. He would not require them again. He dismissed the boy with the handcart, and sent off the telegram to his wife, which Nathan intercepted. Then he sat down to think. He had found the Sahib-i-dírína; his satisfaction at that success overcame his disappointment at his failure to get it. That was only a temporary failure. He could not admit the possibility that, having found the Sahib-i-dírína, he would be unable to get it. That was merely a question of time, and of thinking out a suitable way.

He had taken the precaution to bring down with him a couple of flat glass bottles, filled with the absinthe of Pernod. He fished one of these out of his bundle, mixed himself a draught in a cracked mug, and stretched himself on the untidy bed in his grimy attic. How to get a ring from a lady who does not wish to part with it? That was the problem. So far—to himself he admitted it—he had been tactless. It was no wonder that Mrs. Barley thought he was drunk, and declined to have anything to do with him. And he had made a great mistake in not going round to the back door afterwards. He might have gained some valuable information. It was not any excessive regard for the shilling silver bangle that had stopped him. It was simply that in his excitement at having

## The One Before

found the Sahib-i-dírína he had forgotten all about it. It was pardonable, perhaps; he had been taken by surprise, and had not done himself justice. His next move must be far more tactful. And how was tact to get a ring away from a lady who apparently did not care about money, and did not want to part with the ring? The longer that Ezra Carcow stared at the dirty ceiling, the less he seemed able to arrive at a solution. It was so unexpected; he was quite unused to having anything to do with people who did not wish to swindle him. They represented a type that he did not know. And it seemed a little bitter that the woman should have got the better of him, not because she was sharper than he, but because she would not take advantage of what she undoubtedly considered his deplorable condition.

Supposing he put tact aside and tried something else. Something else suggested itself at once, but it was an illegal something. It would be vain to pretend that Carcow had any moral objection to a breach of the law, but he had the gravest possible objection to suffering for it. To be caught would be unpleasant for him personally; it would also be injurious to his business. But much sooner—very much sooner—would he run the risk of being caught than of relinquishing the Sahib-i-dírína now that he had once seen it. The fervour of the chase was upon him. If

## The One Before

he had been told that there was anything that he cared about more than money, he would have resented the insult to his character and understanding. But all the same, he was about to do, in order to get possession of a ring, something that he would certainly not have done to secure five thousand pounds in cold cash.

He consoled himself with the thought that if he wished to avoid being caught he had only to be patient; it was necessary to wait for a favourable opportunity; he had already been too precipitate, and the mistake must not be made again.

He had waited three days, and the absinthe was finished, before he got the opportunity for which he was looking.

## CHAPTER XIX

MR. JOHNSON, in his bedroom in a cheap Bloomsbury lodging-house, made elaborate preparations for the dinner to which Nathan had bidden him at Earl's Court. When he had finished, he looked at himself in the glass and was dissatisfied; he was a small man and his silk hat and frock coat did not suit him; also, though he felt rather a dog and wished, for the evening, to be rather a dog, he looked more like a cat that has been left out in the rain overnight. He put his hat a little on one side, and was immediately transformed into an inebriate and fallen Sunday-school teacher. He restored it hurriedly to its original position, and pinned the flowers in his button-hole. Even then—he felt it acutely—he did not look smart; he looked as if he had put the flowers into his coat in order to look smart, which happened to be the fact. His spotty complexion, his nervous mouth, his mild and beneficent eye, behind his spectacles—all annoyed him. Well, he had done his best; anyhow his hat had been ironed and his boots hurt; very likely he looked better than he thought. So he took courage and the 'bus to Earl's Court.

## The One Before

His appointment with his new acquaintance, Mr. Nathan Rosenstein, was for half-past six, but Mr. Johnson arrived at four. When you pay a shilling to go in it is just as well to have your full shilling's worth. He had not been to the exhibition before, and he thought it a dream of loveliness, and a perfect palace of Sybaritic luxury. He began by having a whiskey and soda, not because he wanted a whiskey and soda but because it seemed to him to be in the part. Then he sampled various side-shows, until his head reeled with wonders. He attempted a mild flirtation with a middle-aged lady who presided over a cigarette stall; she seemed to him to be one of those remote and irresponsible women. In time he realized that he might just as well try to flirt with a stone wall. So he went away saddened with fifty cigarettes, his original intention having been not to go beyond the threepenny packet. Then he listened to music, and smoked some of his fifty. He watched the ladies who passed him; in the faces of some he seemed to see a friendly interest. It was either that or amusement. Punctually at half-past six he was at the place of meeting that Nathan had appointed, at the bandstand opposite the Welcome Club, and found his new friend already awaiting him there.

"I say," said Johnson, with some dismay, after the

## The One Before

first greetings, "you're in evening things. Ought I to have been?"

"Not at all," said Nathan. "Some do and more



don't. It's simply that I've got the habit of it," which by the way was untrue.

"You see," said Johnson apologetically, "I was here early this afternoon."

"Quite so. You hadn't seen the place before. Dull hole, ain't it? The English, you know, can't do these things."

"That's what I've always said," replied Johnson, with conviction. "What I should like to see would

## The One Before

be a little more of the French spirit." It may be added that he did not in the least know what the French spirit was, did not want it, and if he had got it would not have liked it; the wretched little impostor was merely talking for effect and saying what he thought was required. O spectacled martyr to a misapprehension of the *comme il faut*!

Nathan did not pursue the subject. "Anyhow," he said, "let us come and get a drink. I've booked our table. It's at the back of the room, but it was the only one I could get."

So Johnson drank the first cocktail of his innocent life, and was taken for a short stroll round the gardens before dinner. Nathan's conversation was genial and flattering. He showed considerable deference to Johnson's opinions. Johnson's self-respect came back to him in a flood. Life was very rich and rosy.

At dinner Johnson could not but feel that he was in the midst of a scene of unexampled splendour. The lights were pretty. The band without discoursed sweet music. There were any amount of beautiful dresses, and some of them were worn by beautiful women. The long menu promised in the French tongue strange mysteries. The champagne reposed on the ice. It was a gay world. And Mr. Rosenstein was paying for Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Johnson's heart was light within him. He felt like a monarch.

## The One Before

If Mr. Johnson felt like a monarch at the soup, one asks a little nervously what he would feel like at the end of dinner. But it was no part of Nathan's plan to reduce his new friend to a bestial condition. His own sensitive regard for appearances rebelled at the idea. All he required was a warmed, expanded, genial Johnson, with his judgment just off the right balance, a Johnson who could be aroused to do a little bragging, and in return for the confidences that he had received make some confidences of his own.

"Look here," said Nathan, "I know you are a man of the world, and I wish you would give me your advice about a private matter. As a rule I can make up my mind for myself, or for other people. The other day I had one of the Rothschilds in. He'd got a new thing, and wanted to know what I thought about it. I only looked at the first page of the prospectus. 'Don't touch it, Alfred, my boy,' I said. 'Leave it alone.' And he did. I'll bet he's thankful he did too. Yes, I'm not often at a loss. But in this matter I should like a second opinion."

"I haven't had very much to do with business," said Johnson, modestly.

"Perhaps not, but I think you know human nature, and that's what the point turns on. (Waiter, do open that bottle of champagne. What are you thinking about?) I am not supposed to mention what I am

## The One Before

going to tell you. But in your case I know it will be all right. The other day a man came into my office and said 'I want fifty thousand pounds. I am told you can find it for me.' That sort of thing happens every day in the course of business. 'Well,' I said to him; 'I perhaps know a few people who would put that sum into a good thing, but I do not know of anybody who wants to give fifty thousand away. What have you got for it?'"

"A very good answer," said Johnson, solemnly.

"Oh yes, you have to talk to these chaps pretty straight. Well, it turned out that he was an inventor, and if half what he said was true, the thing was worth a good deal more than he was asking. I'd only to put my head out of the window and whistle and I could have got the money for him. The thing was a gas-stove, and it worked out seventy-five per cent. cheaper than any gas-stove on the market."

Johnson pronounced that so far it was so good. He emptied his glass, and Nathan refilled it.

Nathan continued—but we have already met that mythical gas-stove. Nathan mixed up the inventor with a rival inventor; he raised questions of patent law; he told how the original inventor had borrowed a sovereign from him and not repaid it. It was rather a long and complicated story, and Johnson drank and ripened as he listened. The final question, which

## The One Before

Nathan had been unable to settle for himself was whether he ought to trust the original inventor entirely. "Now what do you think of it, Johnson?"

"Norrentirely farrisactory." He pulled himself together. "I mean it is not en-tire-ly sat-is-fac-to-ry." That was better, though the enunciation was perhaps even too clear. He did not see things double, and the dimness of the lights was doubtlessly due to the atmosphere of the room. He felt particularly well and splendid. "I shouldn't trust that man," he continued; "not, at any rate, without further enquiries." Yes, he could speak all right if he gave a little attention to it, and not too much attention. But as a precautionary measure he drank no more champagne.

"I'm much obliged to you for your opinion, and I shall follow it," said Nathan. "That's a weight off my mind. Funny, that the chap should live at Shalton, and that you should have important business there too."

"It wasn't strilly speaking, my business. Strict-ly spea-king, it was business of Mr. Brookes's. And it wasn't exactly business either."

"I shouldn't think that Mr. Brookes can have had much eye for business, or he would never have got rid of you."

## The One Before

"Gorrid of me? He did not get rid of me. There isn't a man living who has ever got rid of me."

Nathan thought that that man would come into existence, however, later in the evening, when Johnson had told his little story. Johnson continued:—

"I gave Mr. Brookes the sack myself. I found that he told lies—and it was about this same business that he told them. No good to ask me to stop after that. Wild horses couldn't have done it."

"You are quite right. A man must have some spirit."

"I don't know if you know the kind of man I am."

"I know you are a man that I have trusted at sight with some very important secrets."

"Thash the kind—I mean, that is the kind of man I am. And I trust you just the same. Though I've only known you a shorrime, a very short time, I'm going to tell you something. Thousands involved. I can't tell you here because there's too many people."

He observed a red face, with fishy eyes, that stared hard at him through spectacles, and recognized slowly that it was his own reflection in the glass, and that the flowers in his button-hole had—very properly—died of disgust.

"Just as you like," said Nathan. "Anyhow it would be pleasanter to take our coffee outside. I'll find a place where you won't be overheard."

## The One Before

As Johnson rose from his chair, all the lights in the room appeared to take a sharp swerve upwards. He steadied himself, took his hat from the waiter, assumed an expression of extreme severity and walked in an absolutely straight line out into the gardens. To the hypercritical the exit might have seemed to wear rather too much the air of a performance; also, he had left his umbrella and gloves behind, but Nathan brought them out to him. Johnson's gratitude at their restoration was a little excessive.

Nathan found a table sufficiently remote from the crowd to satisfy Johnson, and the coffee was brought to them. "Well," said Johnson, as he lit his cigarette, "I'm glad to sit down again. I don't want it gellarary known—I mean gellenary known—but my boots are rather tight."

Nathan suppressed the *tu quoque* which arose to his lips. "Well, now," he said, "what was that about the way you scored off Brookes?"

Johnson had three tries at the words "solemn secrecy," and having cleared this obstacle and been reassured by Nathan, plunged into his story. Progress was slow at first, but his head cleared as he went on; his sentences became less spasmodic, and he no longer spoke loudly; his words gave him no trouble, and finally he became sorry that he had ever embarked on the story at all.



**JOHNSON PLUNGED INTO HIS STORY.**



## The One Before

Nathan sat with his hands under the table, and occasionally made unseen a pencil note on his shirt-cuff. He was greatly interested. He did not believe in the account of the magical powers of the ring in the least. But he had little doubt that it was the ring that Ezra had gone to Shalton about. The telegram that he had opened had probably referred to it. But Ezra had not returned; Nathan was inclined to think that this was because Ezra had not got the ring, though he had found it. He had no doubt that the ring was of great value—either as a curio or perhaps for some sentimental reason. His brother-in-law, Ezra, did not take trouble for nothing.

As Johnson began his story, an old gentleman of distinguished appearance sat down at the next table. It is an expression which Johnson would never have pardoned, but his back and the old gentleman's back faced each other. The old gentleman ordered a cup of coffee which he did not drink, read a letter that he drew from his pocket—or at least seemed to read it—and did not remain more than a few minutes.

After the story Nathan proposed another turn through the gardens. In the crowd Johnson had the misfortune to lose Nathan; at least, that was Johnson's idea of what happened; Nathan's was somewhat different. He had really no more use for Johnson, and he had a good deal to think about.

## The One Before

Johnson was tired, and the 'buses were full. He permitted himself the luxury of a hansom. But even that could not revive his departed feelings of splendour. The fires were out and the ashes were cold. His boots were a perfect torture, and he was aware that he had made a fool of himself. On the hall-table of the shabby boarding-house lay a letter addressed to him in a handwriting that he recognized. It had been delivered by messenger. Johnson did not wait to remove those boots; he tore the envelope open, and standing under the gas-jet read as follows:—

“DEAR MR. JOHNSON,

“I do not know whether you will be sufficiently sober on arriving home to understand this letter. When I saw you it did not seem probable. But I require you to be at my house at nine to-morrow morning punctually, as I may have to call on Sir Thomas Folmersham at nine thirty.

“Faithfully yours,

“NATHANIEL BROOKES.”

“I’m done for,” said Johnson aloud. “Utterly done for.”

Then he sat down on the stairs, took off his boots, and wished very sincerely that he was dead.



Tom B



HE TORE  
THE EN-  
VELOPE  
OPEN.



## CHAPTER XX

"Good morning, Mr. Johnson," said Mr. Brookes, politely. "Here you are, back in the old familiar rooms, where for so long we worked together."

"I have come," said Johnson, doggedly, "in answer to the letter I received from you last night."

"Here it was that you delivered that parting oration which you reproduced in public, with my name attached, for the benefit of your foreign friend last night. I cannot repeat your pronunciation, because at the moment I don't happen to be drunk enough, nor do I wish to shout, as you did. But I recall the words: 'Mr. Brookes, you are a liar. I will have nothing more to do with you, sit down and write a cheque for what is due to me—I leave you at once—this minute. Refuse—and take the consequences.' That is what you told your friend you said to me, and you told him that I answered that I had brought it on myself and must submit. Now, Mr. Johnson, did you ever say anything of the kind, and did I ever speak to you in that spirit?"

"No," said Johnson, gloomily.

## The One Before

"Then it would seem that Mr. Johnson is the liar."

"I had taken too much wine."

"*In vino veritas*—except in the matter of bragging."

"He had taunted me in saying that you had dismissed me. I hardly knew what I was doing. I am ready to write any letter you please to my friend, withdrawing what I said and telling him the truth."

"Thanks, Mr. Johnson, I won't trouble you. Apparently, the opinion of that greasy young man to whom you were talking is of some value to you—at any rate, when you're drunk. But I'm afraid I could never get drunk enough to think it of any importance to me. You may take my repute into the fried-fish shop, but don't expect me to follow it. No, Johnson, if that had been all you said, I should not have fetched you here this morning. The trouble is that your imagination broke down and you went on with the truth. You told the story of 'The One Before,' and your friend with the dirty hands wrote names and addresses on his shirt-cuff under the table."

Johnson's mouth opened with amazement. "I never saw that," he said.

"Of course you didn't. You didn't see me sitting within a yard of you. You didn't see that you were being pumped dry by an overdressed uncleanly scamp. You didn't see anything. So you broke the agree-

## The One Before

ment which you made with me when I first employed you—made on your word of honour. And you have probably done a great deal of harm—not to me, on whom you thought you were revenging yourself, but to another whom you don't know."

"I'm very sorry. You saw I was excited with drink—to which I'm not used—but that's no excuse. I see what it all leads up to."

"It leads up to your dismissal by Sir Thomas and your ruin, if I do my duty. But I'm not anxious to ruin you. Take that sheet of paper and write down your friend's name and address."

"His name is Rösenstein. I do not know his address. I met him at his club."



"Put down the name and address of his club then. What's the fellow's trade?"

"He told me that he was a financial agent—I

## The One Before

think he said he had done business for the Rothschilds."

"Ah! Well, you needn't trouble to write that down," said Mr. Brookes, sardonically. "Now give me that paper, and listen. I wish you never to mention to any one any of my private business. That applies also to Sir Thomas's private business, since I was fool enough to recommend you to him. And as a natural corollary, I wish you to become a total abstainer. Secondly, I wish all that has passed at this interview to be kept from—er—Rosenstein, who must not know that I have his name and club address."

"All that I am prepared to swear on oath to——"

"Stop! You're not a man of honour, and your oath's worth nothing. I won't take it. I won't even listen to the farce. But as to Rosenstein—I tell you plainly that if you breathe a word to him, or give him the slightest hint, I shall know it. His conduct will tell me it. In that case I shall show you no mercy. As for the rest, you've already had a lesson, and perhaps will not want another. But I'm going to have an eye on you—and there again the slightest indiscretion will meet with no mercy. That's all I've got to say. No, I don't want any assurances—I tell you I don't value them from you. Leave me. Get out. That's all."

As the depressed and repentant Johnson withdrew,

## The One Before

Tarver brought in a card. "Yes," said Mr. Brookes, as he glanced at it. "In here, please."

Tarver ushered in a commonplace-looking young man, who seemed to have clerk stamped all over him—and was not a clerk.

"Good morning," said Mr. Brookes, speaking rapidly, as he handed to the new-comer the sheet on



which Johnson had written. "That's the man's name and club address. I want to know where he works, if he does work anywhere, where he lives, what his character is, and anything else that you can find out by one o'clock to-day. Of course you must have longer if it is necessary."

"The time's short," said the private detective, "but

## The One Before

it seems all simple enough. I know a little of the Sceptre Club; it can be worked easily. I'll start at once, sir, and be back as soon as I can. Good morning."

When the man had gone, Mr. Brookes went to his writing-table and wrote three telegrams. The first was to Mrs. Derriford, and ran as follows: "May I take you at your word, and come down for a few days. I should arrive to-morrow morning, if that is really quite convenient to you. Kindest regards to you all." The second telegram, to Jimmy Havern at Chelsea, bade him come to lunch at one and hear some important news. These telegrams were signed with his name. The third bore no signature whatever, was addressed to Mrs. Barley, and ran: "A sincere friend recommends you not to leave the house to-day or to-morrow. You would be in some danger."

"Have those telegrams sent at once, Tarver. Pay replies to the two signed telegrams—not, of course, to the other. If they ask for a name and address on the back of the unsigned telegram, you're not bound to put mine."

"Quite so, sir. I understand," said Tarver.

Then Mr. Nathaniel Brookes dismissed the subject from his mind, and set himself to work upon his book of travels. In the course of the morning he

## The One Before

had a reply from Jimmy, saying that he would come with pleasure, and another from Mrs. Derriford welcoming her guest heartily. At twenty minutes to one the detective returned with a brief but sufficient report. At a few minutes past one Jimmy and his uncle sat down to luncheon together.



"Well," said Jimmy, "and what's the important news? Good or bad?"

"Last night it was bad; this morning it's better. In fact it's going to be all right. But we'll speak of it after lunch."

When they had taken their cigars into the library, Mr. Brookes told his story.

"Last night I went to the club to play piquet

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with a man, and found a note from him to say he'd got pleurisy. Beastly selfish of him, I thought. I picked up a paper and saw the advertisement of the Earl's Court Exhibition. It struck me that it would be pleasanter out-of-doors than in, and that I might stroll through the gardens and hear the music for half an hour. So off I went. As I was passing a group of tables outside one of the refreshment places, I heard a voice from one of the tables say loudly: 'Mr. Brookes, you are a liar!' Jimmy, don't smile, it's irreverent. I looked round. There sat my ex-secretary Johnson, and with him a greasy young swell in evening things, with dirty paws and an obvious nationality. Johnson (who by the way was considerably drunk) was giving his friend a dramatic account of the way in which he, Johnson, dismissed me, Brookes, from his service, so I sat down at the next table with my back to Johnson. In a minute I saw that our greasy swell was pumping Johnson as to The One Before; and the poor idiot was blurt-ing out all he knew about it. When I left, our greasy swell was privately taking a note of Ernest Saunders Barley's address under the table on his shirt-cuff."

"What? Do you think Johnson's pal is one of the people who are after the ring?"

"Not one of the regular lot. But he has found

## The One Before

out that it means a good deal of money, and he will try to get it. If I know anything of faces, he's on the make and he's quite unscrupulous. Well, I sent Johnson a note last night that brought him early this morning—a bloodshot and repentant Johnson. I found from him that his friend's name was Rosenstein, that Johnson had met him at some pig-stye of a club, and knew nothing about him. I also had here a private enquiry agent, whom I've employed before, and sent him off to find out what he could. He brought me his report just before you came."

"Well, what does he say?"

"He got at the club's hall-porter. Rosenstein is a clever fellow, always smartly dressed, gambles, and does little work of any kind. Of late he has been helping in a curio shop kept by his brother-in-law, a man called Carcow, who's away now. The police were after Rosenstein three years ago, in connection with some long-firm frauds, but had not enough evidence to go on."

"That doesn't seem much."

"No? Well, my agent found a little boy taking a letter to the post to oblige Mrs. Carcow. Carcow's present address is a public-house in Dowse Lane, Shalton."

"Then Carcow's after the ring too?"

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"Possibly. Possibly it's only a coincidence, and his business in Shalton is something quite different. One thing's rather queer, if Carcow and Rosenstein are both after the ring, they are not working together—otherwise, Rosenstein would have had no need to pump Johnson. Yet a curio dealer would be just the man that would be employed to hunt for The One Before; possibly Rosenstein got some suspicions from Carcow, and pumped Johnson to get fuller information. Anyhow, I don't like the idea of either of those blackguards trying to get the ring from Mary; their methods would possibly be unpleasant. So I've arranged by telegram to go down to the Derrifords to-morrow, when I'll save trouble by stealing the ring myself. I shouldn't like Mary to get hurt, and I should be extremely sorry to lose the ring."

"But you ought to be in Shalton now, uncle. Why wait till to-morrow? anything may be happening to-day. Then, again, unless these brutes know that Mary no longer has the ring, they may still go on annoying her. It seems to me the very deuce of a business, anyhow. Couldn't the police be put on to it?"

"Jimmy, in these times of stress you lose your head; you hurry; it has been well observed that haste is of the devil. Take it that danger threatens Mary

## The One Before

from Rosenstein and Carcow. Rosenstein may possibly have gone down to Shalton this morning. If he has, he will, from his regard for his own safety, try fair means first; there is nothing to fear from him before to-morrow. Carcow has been away some time; he may have now got the ring, in which case we need not trouble. He may just be on the point of trying objectionable methods—perhaps violent methods—of getting it. But if he had been intending to resort to them, I think he would have done it before, and we should have heard of it. It does not seem to me probable, but I have guarded against the remote possibility by sending Mary an anonymous and melodramatic telegram, warning her not to leave the house to-day or to-morrow. So long as she stays at home, she will have the strong right arm of the esteemed Ernest Saunders—and other right arms—to protect her, if needs be. Yes, I decided I could quite keep my dinner engagement to-night, give Mrs. Derriford twenty-four hours' notice of my visit, and run down to Shalton to-morrow. It will be time enough if I steal the ring then. And, when I've got it, I have an absolutely certain way of convincing Carcow and Rosenstein that the ring is not in Shalton, and that they may abandon the search for it. You shall hear about that later."

"I'm not so confident about it as you seem to

## The One Before

be, and I wish to goodness we'd never had anything to do with the ring. But it's your responsibility."

"I accept it cheerfully. Nobody's going to get hurt; make your mind easy about it. Let's talk of something else. How's your work going? Fixed up everything with Derriford?"

"The work's not as bad as it might be," said Jimmy. "By the way, I must get back to it at once, for I told my model she could come again at three. I begin Miss Derriford's portrait as soon as she comes to London, and that's to be in a few days, I think. I wrote to old Derriford last night."

He had; he had also written to Miss Hilda Derriford, but he was not going to mention that just yet.

"That's all right," said Mr. Brookes. "If Romney could have painted her!"

"Then you'd have got a good picture but a poor portrait. Look at his Lady Hamiltons—all different. Still," he added modestly, "If he could have painted her, I'd have let him. It's just possible that I shan't do much better."

## CHAPTER XXI

ON the same morning, Mary was on the point of starting out for a walk when Mr. Brookes's anonymous telegram was handed to her. She thought it over for a minute or two. What on earth could it mean? Probably it was some imbecile joke of Jimmy's, and the explanation would arrive later. She never dreamed for a moment of taking the warning seriously. It was a glorious morning; she had a new hat, and liked herself in it; she felt younger, prettier, and in better spirits than usual. The anonymous telegram did not frighten her in the least; it merely puzzled her to imagine what the joke could possibly be.

In the road at the bottom of the drive she hesitated for a moment, and then took a path across the fields. A shabby-looking old man who was loitering down the road, noted the direction she took and followed her. In the first three fields he kept a long way behind her, and then he quickened his pace. In the fifth field she heard his quick steps close behind her and turned round. She recognized immediately the

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horrible drunken old man who had come to the house to sell his Oriental rugs, and had said that he wanted to buy her ring. She showed less fear than she felt.

"Go on, please," she said, "I don't like to have people walking just behind me."

"It is all right," said Carcow, a little breathless. "I do not want to hurt you, if it can be helped. I want your ring—the ring that I offered to buy the other day. I must have it. I will still buy it if you will sell, and pay the money now. If you will not sell, then I must take it—even if I spoil your pretty dress—even if I break your finger—even if I murder you for it. It is no good to scream. There is no one near, and if you scream, I strike at once with this stick."

Mary looked round; it was true that there was no one near.

"You don't frighten me in the least, and if you don't go away you will get yourself into trouble. The other day I thought you were drunk; either you are still drunk or you are mad. In any case the police will be after you, if I know anything about it. How dare you——"

"Stop that. Be quick, now. I must have the ring. Do you sell or do I take it?"

"What is the use of talking of selling? I want



**SHE HEARD HIS QUICK STEPS CLOSE BEHIND HER, AND  
TURNED ROUND.**



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thirty pounds for that ring, and you have not thirty pence."

"Ah! I am not so poor as I look." He pulled a greasy bag from a pocket inside his waistcoat. "I count out thirty golden sovereigns for you. Off with your glove, and let me have the ring."

Carcow was greatly relieved; he did not want to use violence, and was terribly afraid of the consequences. Mary's plan was of the simplest; she intended to drop some of the money; when he stooped to pick it up, she meant to push him over and then run for it. With the start she would get in this way, she had no doubt she would be able to escape; she was an active woman and he was an old man, he would not be able to go far. But another form of deliverance was close at hand. Through the gate at the further end of the field came a young lady and her dog. The lady was Hilda Derriford, and the dog was the brindled bull-dog, Peter. Mary whistled, and the dog came rushing towards them.

"Put up that bag and run for your life," she said to Carcow. "If that dog catches you, you're a dead man."

Carcow took in the situation rapidly. He did not like dogs—especially bull-dogs—and it seemed to him that this bull-dog was coming in a hurry and on business. He did not even stop to swear; he ran—

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ran faster than he had run for years. Mary called after him that she was going straight to the police-station, and then she devoted herself to stopping



Peter. As Carcow tumbled and rolled over the stile at the end of the field, a hurried glance backward showed him that Mary was having some difficulty in keeping the dog back. Peter was torn betwixt his

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native common sense and his acquired education. His common sense told him that the whistle had been urgent and his assistance required; the fact that the man ran was evidence of his guilt, richly supported by his personal appearance; and obviously his first duty was to kill the man that ran. In all of this his common sense was quite correct. On the other hand, his education had shown him that he must always obey Mr. Derriford, Hilda, Mary, and the coachman's youngest little girl, aged six. And at present Mary was hanging on to his collar, spanking him, and telling him to lie down and not make a fool of himself. Finally, he yielded under protest to education—a sweet old idiot of a dog that feared nothing, would fight anything, and let a child of six make him ridiculous with her own sun-bonnet, tied rather too tightly under his chin. It was true that the dog had elected this ruling syndicate himself; but, once elected, he did not question their right to rule. He quite understood that Mr. Derriford was a just man, and would shoot him if necessary; that Hilda was his mistress; that Mary was his best and most sympathetic friend; and that one must be careful and gentle with a little golden-haired girl of six. But he could never understand that the vicar had called with no intention of stealing the aprons, nor could he even approve of Mr. Ernest Saunders Barley — though

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afterwards, in deference to Mary, he learned to tolerate him.

Hilda came running up, and put the dog on the lead. "Who was that man? What was he doing? Why didn't you let Peter go after him? (Good beast, Peter.) We came just in time. I was coming to see you." Hilda was much more excited than Mary.

Mary laughed, and told Peter that he was an angel of light, though he might not look it—a statement which Peter found gratifying but inconsistent with the fact that he had been spanked. With many interrupting questions and exclamations she told Hilda the whole story, as they walked back to The Chestnuts.

"But who sent the telegram?" asked Hilda. "It must have been from somebody who knew that this brute might attack you."

"But he wouldn't have told anybody he was going to do it. No, the telegram was a coincidence, and part of some idiotic practical joke of Jimmy's, I expect."

"He wouldn't have done such a thing. I'm quite sure of it."

The tone was very positive. Mary raised her eyebrows. Hilda blushed; her new habit of blushing was infinitely becoming. "I mean, I don't think he would. O Mary, I had a letter from him this morn-

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ing, and they're so glad at home, and you were the very first person I was going to tell!"

Mary's immediate reply was to kiss Hilda with enthusiastic affection.

"Dear Hilda! Really and truly? I can't begin to tell you how delighted I am. I knew it all along, and, now it's happened, I can hardly believe it. Tell me everything at once, dear. Have you answered? When will he know? I want to telegraph my congratulations to him."

"He will know this afternoon. He asked me to send a messenger with the reply—if it was—well, if it was what it is. So William's going up by the one-thirty, and will get to the studio by three. *And perhaps he'll bring me another letter back with him.*"

(And was it for that model, or was it for this messenger, that Jimmy had insisted on being back at the studio by three?)

There followed many and almost indiscriminate eulogia on that pleasant young man and quite decent artist, James Havern. Peter heard them all, as he trotted docilely at his mistress's heel, and—being a well-bred dog—heard them without a smile. Conscious that subjects for congratulation were in the air, he wagged his tail, with as much enthusiasm as could be expected from a led dog.

Hilda accompanied Mary to the police-station.

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There Mary told a polite and perplexed inspector a somewhat confused story of an elderly tramp with a beard and a bag of money who had threatened to



murder her in the fields. Possibly, she would have made a better story of it, if the fresh excitement of Hilda's engagement had left her mind clearer. No, she didn't want to charge the man with anything, only she did think the police ought to do something; they might find the man, and frighten him a little, and tell him to go away. The inspector made a note or two and sighed patiently. He was a married man himself, and not unused to the workings of the feminine mind.

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Mary bore Hilda off to lunch with her. Ernest Saunders Barley was away, having gone in great glory, a new suit, and a first-class smoking-compartment, to establish the repute of Shalton golf on some far-distant links. At lunch the conversation returned to the subject of the ring again.

"And what would you have done if Peter and I had not turned up at the critical moment?"

"Dropped his money—pushed him over as he stooped to pick it up—and then run for it. I could not have given him the ring in any case, because I hadn't it with me."

"Really! I thought you always wore it."

"I always have done. But to-day it wasn't comfortable when I put on my gloves to go out; so I left it on the table in my room. O Hilda, I've got such a splendid idea. It was Jimmy who gave Ernest that ring—so you shall wear it until Jimmy gives you a ring for yourself—it will be a sort of deputy—understudy to your engagement ring."

"But I shall be so afraid of losing it. You say Mr. Smythe told you it was valuable, and this mad tramp offered you bags of gold for it."

"But Jimmy said distinctly that it was of no money-value."

"Did he? Then it isn't. Whenever he does give an opinion it's always right. I've noticed that, and he

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knows any amount about curios and out-of-the-way things. Those two lunatics must have mistaken it for something else. I should love to have it, if you really don't mind, and I'll give it back as soon as I get the real ring."

"Then you shall have it now. Jane, run upstairs—no, don't, because we shall want you in a moment—tell Ellen to run upstairs and find a ring with two gold snakes on it. I think it's on the dressing-table—or possibly the mantelpiece—but she must find it and bring it down."

"Certainly, ma'am," said Jane, respectfully. She gave the message in the kitchen as follows:—

"Maudie, my dear, you 'urry; you're to fetch the Duchess's ring—you know, the tin-pot one. And if it ain't in one place it's in another, and that's all she knows about it. And if you've not got it inside of a minute, you'll have your head chopped off."

Ellen placed her thumb to her nose, extended her fingers, and with a slow and stately grace passed up the back-stairs. She found the ring at once, and—being in an humorous mood—put it on her finger. She was still wearing it when Jane came into the kitchen for the soufflé.

"There you are," said Ellen, as she took the ring off. "If she wants my ring, she can have it. And

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if she'd like my diamond ear-rings as well, she's only got to ask. You say so."

"I'll mention it," said Jane.

Ellen had scarcely worn the ring for a minute, but it was enough to give her for an hour or two that afternoon some touch of Mary's nature. Had Mr. Hicks called that afternoon, he might have found his hopes revive considerably. Mrs. Dawes and Jane noticed that Ellen was quiet and pensive, and had things to say to her on the subject. But, on the whole, it is just as well that the faithful gardener did not call, for by the evening Ellen had returned to her normal state, and the hope revived would assuredly have been quenched again.

In the meantime Hilda wore the ring, and therewith began gradually to assume some of the more prominent characteristics of Ellen-Maudie — Ellen-Maudie's eye for the main chance, Ellen-Maudie's contempt for men, and Ellen-Maudie's scorn for the married state.

It was a good thing that Mr. Brookes was to arrive on the following morning; his intervention was beginning to be most urgently required. Whatever the good work *The One Before* had done in the past, by enabling Mary to reform and improve her husband, it obviously was on the way to dealing disaster now.

## CHAPTER XXII

BUT on the evening before Mr. Brookes's arrival, another gentleman, also much interested in the Sahib-i-dírína, stepped out on to the down platform at Shalton station; and when it is said that this was an overdressed young gentleman, that he had bulbous and apologetic eyes, and that he stepped with a third-class ticket out of a first-class carriage, his identity is perhaps sufficiently indicated. Mr. Nathan Rosenstein carried with him a small brown bag, refused the offer of a cab outside the station, and made his way to the Railway Hotel, not more than a hundred yards distant. He thought that hotel would supply his simple needs.

With commendable caution—or, if you prefer it, with his native suspiciousness—he thought he would investigate further before definitely engaging his room. And therefore he selected, not the hotel entrance, but that which bore on its portal, in a mosaic of stained glass, the words "Saloon Bar." In that august and crimson-plush retreat was seated one man only, an old man with a ragged beard and restless

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eyes, and with a heterogeneous bundle on the floor beside him. He no longer wore the ragged garb in which he had affrighted Mary in the fields that morning. He wore the decent silk hat and thin black overcoat in which he had arrived at Shalton. He was aware that the police might be looking for a tramp, and would take no notice of the decent bag-



man that he now appeared to be. He sat in an attitude of the deepest dejection, his head in his hands, with an unfinished glass of brandy-and-water on the marble-topped table by his side.

He turned, as the glass door swang, and Nathan entered. But Nathan had had just one glance before the turn, and had no difficulty in spelling out the absolute failure depicted in Carcow's face.

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"Well, Ezra, my boy," said Nathan, easily, "you look surprised to see me. I am surprised to see you, too; but we are always well met, good friend, brothers-



in-law, eh? Packed up to go home, I see. That is funny also. Your business at Shalton is finished just when mine begins."

"Ah? Very pleased to see you, Nathan. You are a damned thief—I have always known that.

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Perhaps you come a little too late for your business; perhaps that business is done already. But never mind—I do not want your secrets. I only ask you one question, though I know you will not tell me the truth. What has Rebecca told you?”

“Why, I have no secrets, I put all my cards down on the table. I am here to get the Sahib-i-dírína, which is a curious ring for the finger, and is worth little, but fetches big money. I have known of it a long time, but only last night did I get the finishing touch. Rebecca has told me nothing. What should Rebecca know about the Sahib-i-dírína? Besides, I never talk business to Rebecca—except just the matters in your shop, you know. Perhaps I am too late; I can only go up to The Chestnuts and try. But then—this may all be Greek to you. You came down here to attend a few sales, I was told; very likely you know nothing of the Sahib-i-dírína. But then, I do not want your secrets either. There, Ezra, my boy, we won’t talk business now. After shop hours, eh? Come, you will finish that and take a glass of brandy at my expense. What?”

Ezra was not a fool. He collated the principal facts in one rapid mental flash. He himself had failed to get the ring, and it was no longer safe for him to remain in Shalton; Nathan (no matter how) was aware of the value of the ring and where it was to

## The One Before

be found. Therefore he would do better to cling on to Nathan and save something out of the wreck. He also guessed that Nathan had some use for him, and in fact could not get the business completed without him; for undoubtedly otherwise Nathan would never have said a word about the ring, would never have put a card on the table, and would have spun off a string of lies as to abnormal gas-stoves or other fantastic business.

And Ezra was entirely right. The important fact that Nathan did not know, and wished to find out from Ezra, was where his market was. Nothing is of more value than you can get for it, and a ton of diamonds is worthless to the lost traveller in the desert. And Nathan had not the least idea where he ought to sell the *Sahib-i-dirina*, if he ever secured it. If the worst came to the worst, he believed he could get a few pounds for it from Mr. Brookes, but he felt pretty certain that he would get nothing like the top-price there. He doubted very much if Mr. Brookes knew himself what the top-price was; Nathan's opinion on the subject was formed much more from the fact that Ezra had thought it worth while to spend days and days in Shalton in order to get the ring than from anything that the intoxicated Johnson had told him.

It was a pretty duel, but the result of it was almost

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a foregone conclusion. Nathan, as things stood, had by far the better chance of getting the ring; Ezra had by far the better chance of selling it to advantage. The voice of cold reason said distinctly "Halves!" And now, as on many previous and many subsequent occasions, Ezra realized the beauty and profit of the position of the middleman.

"Always the same, my dear," said Ezra, with his best imitation of the indulgent smile. "Light-hearted, dressed in fine clothes, ready to stand a drink to anybody, ah, yes—and giving away all the little things that you should not speak of to anybody! O you are a damned old thief, Nathan." But the words had changed their character altogether now, and the tone of Ezra's voice made them to blossom forth as a term of affectionate endearment. "Well, I do not reproach you for it. When you speak to me alone, you speak to me alone. You know it and I know it. I drink some brandy-and-water with you with pleasure, for in these country-places one cannot get absinthe, and I have yet an hour or so to wait for the up-train. Well now, you have put your cards on the table. I do the same—and perhaps even more frankly. I have been after the ring, and I have not got it. I am the only man in England who knows where to get the money for it. Perhaps, I wished to make you a little surprise—to set you up

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in a business as Rebecca has so often asked me—but I need not speak of that. All I say is that I have failed to get the ring, and that it is better for me to leave this hole of a town immediately. I tried a big coup, a very daring coup, and the bottom has dropped out of it. It may be that in time I should have come back again, should have tried something else and should have secured the ring. That would have been good for you, for I do not forget those of my family, but this is better. You also have found out about the ring. I thought I was the only man in England that knew where to get five thousand pounds for it, but I see I am mistaken. You have found that out, too. Very well, my boy, go in and win. Do not mind me; I have the little shop, and do not need to take anything from you. I wish you luck. I drink to it. No, the five thousand for Nathan! Come, drink!”

And the most cunning thing in this speech was that Ezra, overcoming his natural instincts, actually named the real sum that he would receive for the ring—if he ever had it to sell.

“Come now!” said Nathan, as he made himself perfectly comfortable on the crimson-plush. “I know you have a regard for your family. Believe me, Ezra, I have always known you were my friend; but I am not a man without heart—not I either. There

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is no reason why we should not share this. Perhaps I can get money for the ring. Mr. Brookes would pay it. (Ah, I see, you do not know about Mr. Brookes; well, never mind that.) But he would not go so far as five thousand. 'Two thousand'—that is what he always says to me—'Two thousand, Nathan, my dear boy, if you get back my ring for me.' If I share with you, that is five hundred pounds better money for me. If I do not, that is two thousand for me and nothing for you. Only, if we are to share, you must tell me the whole story."

From long experience, Ezra was enabled to sort out the principal lies from Nathan's friendly statement. He knew nothing about Mr. Brookes, but he did not believe that Mr. Brookes had ever offered two thousand—if he had, then Nathan, knowing no better, would have snapped at the offer, and would not have taken his brother-in-law into his confidence. None the less, Ezra judged it better, with certain reservations, to tell the whole story.

"Very well, Nathan. Perhaps my failure may help you to succeed. That is all I ask. On the terms you have mentioned, I tell you everything that I know and everything that I have done. I do not want anything in writing, we are of one family. I take your word as I would take the word of my own mother if that blessed woman were still alive on

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earth; well then, I happened to hear that five thousand pounds was to be got in a certain quarter—which I need not mention yet—for this ring, which was accurately described to me. If I had a pencil I could make you the inscription on the tablet of the ring, myself with my own hand. Then I received information which led me to think that the ring might be in Shalton. I did not come with the address all ready as you do; I was not so fortunate, I had to hunt about and find; and I found. Then I tried to buy the ring; the lady would not listen.”

“You mean Mrs. Barley or the daughter?”

“I mean Mrs. Barley. There is no daughter.” Nathan’s attempt to show an intimate knowledge had somewhat overreached itself, but he did the best he could with his blunder.

“Anyhow, you think there is no daughter. Very well; we need not go into that, and what next?”

“To-day I tried some violence—well, a threat—I had found her alone in some fields, and what else was there to do? Everything seemed to be going well, and then there came a bull-dog. It came after me, and I was much embarrassed. I had a stick in my hands, but my head was lost, and then these bull-dogs are not quite like the other dogs that one keeps off with a stick. I had to go away immediately.”

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Nathan lay back on the crimson-plush lounge and chuckled heartily.

"You laugh!" Ezra continued. "I tell you, it might have been my life. And after that the lady went to the police, and so it is better for me to leave Shalton for a little while. I said to myself that there was you, Nathan, and that I could send you to try for the ring and give you a thousand pounds if you found it. I pay for the little bedroom that I have had, and go straight to the station. There is no train for a long time, and I come to this place to wait. Suddenly in you walk! Now, is not that a special providence—except that you ask for more. And that I must put up with. Well, how do you go to work?"

Nathan had stopped laughing. He sipped his liquor reflectively. "And what are the servants like at The Chestnuts? You worked them, I suppose."

"Well, no. I was not trying that. Perhaps that would have been better."

"Couldn't have been much worse, could it? What made you try to get the ring by violence?"

"I saw no other way."

"And what made you cut and run, just at the moment when you were getting the ring? You had that big stick in your hand. I do not care whether it was a bull-dog or not; one good whack on the

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skull with that, and you might have finished your business without trouble."

"Perhaps. It was not expected, and, as I have said, my head was lost. Then my nerves are not those of a young man."

Nathan made a contemptuous exclamation. "Nerves? You have none; they are gone into the absinthe bottle. And your brains seem to be going the same way. See what a nasty mess you have made of this business; and that makes it all the more difficult for me. Does it seem to you a right and just thing that you should distrust me, have secrets from me, blunder and spoil everything, and then ask me for a present of two thousand and five hundred pounds? That is what it comes to. Now, if you had said to me, 'Give me the ring, and I find a five-thousand buyer for twenty per cent. com.,' then that would have been talking."

And at this Ezra Carcow arose in his fury and spake with his tongue.

"You damned thief! You dog! You reptile! You ape! My brains was good enough for Nathan Rosenstein still. Look at this!" He tapped his left forefinger with his right. "If you could have got on without me you would. You cannot. So when you bluster, I smile. Bring the ring to me, and I will give you two thousand five hundred pounds for

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EZRA • CARLOW •  
AROSE • IN •  
HIS • FURY •



it. If you can get that anywhere else, then get it. But—and I tell you this seriously—if you say any more that you are not treated fairly, my price for that ring is one five-pound note.”

“But then there is Mr. Brookes.”

“Everything you have said about Brookes is a lie, and I know it. If you pretend that it is not a lie, then my price for the ring once more is one five-pound note. Father Abraham! Have I nurtured this young man; have I saved him from the police; have I paid him commissions—always liberal; and then is he to turn on me and treat me as a swindler, and

## The One Before

eat his own words? For yes, Nathan, it was you that said halves."

"All right," said Nathan. "This absinthe makes you get excited. I was only just talking, and I do not want to go back on my word at all, especially with an old friend. Cards on the table again. I shall see the ring—perhaps in church. I shall have a copy made. I shall work the servants, get the real ring in my hand, exchange it for the copy, and scoot before the exchange is found out. Get your money ready; I shall call for it in a fortnight."

"Now that is sense," said Ezra, appeased. "And how was the health of Rebecca when you left?"

## CHAPTER XXIII

MR. NATHAN ROSENSTEIN slightly changed his plans; they involved too much delay, and he was not a gentleman who allowed grass to grow under his feet. Next morning he might have been found at the back door of "The Chestnuts" in conversation with Jane. He had for sale some elegant little gun-metal watches with gun-metal bows attached, on easy terms. The system (which he ascribed to the *Times* newspaper) was sixpence down, and the rest when you felt like it.

"Not me," said Jane. "Never was in debt in my life, and not going to begin now. Still, if they're as good as they look, and you didn't want much for them—ready money—then I don't say."

"Good as they look, miss? Why, they're better. What some put into extra finish in the cases, we put into the works. It wouldn't pay me to sell a watch that wouldn't go, and I'll tell you why—I trade to make trade. In a few months I shall be round again with another cheap line, and what chance should I have if I had sold rubbish before?"

"Well, you wouldn't find me here anyhow."

## The One Before

"What?" Nathan winked. "I see. The young men about here have some judgment; but there, I always come too late for everything. Well now,



what prettier ornament can a young lady have on a wedding-dress than a watch like this? Being a special case, I shall say eight shillings."

Jane smiled; it would not even be incorrect to say that she giggled.

"If you like to sell it for seven, I'll have it."

## The One Before

"Why, miss, each of these watches costs us seven and sixpence to make. I cannot afford to give money away, like that cracked old man who was selling the carpets down in the High Street just now."

"We had him here the other day. Missus thought he was drunk, though it was not what I should call drunk. He wanted to give her twenty pounds for a ring, the old fool."

"Perhaps not such a fool. If there were some fine stones——"

"Why, it was a little old ring you wouldn't have given a pound for. No stones in it at all."

Nathan was vastly amused. "Well," he said, "I should like to have a look at that ring—just to be able to say I've seen it when I tell the joke to my friends."

"Now, I might have shown it you if you'd come yesterday, for she left it out on her dressing-table. But now it's gone."

"I see. So she's sold it to that cranky old chap after all?"

"Oh no! She gave it away to Miss Derriford—a lady friend of hers. Now, am I going to have that watch for seven shillings?"

"Well, I never could stand out against a pretty girl; that is why I am such a poor man. You shall

## The One Before

have it for seven. And so that ring has gone to Miss Danford, in the little house by the bridge—I know it.”

“Not Danford. It’s Derriford—big place at the corner where you turns off to Frelingham. Now, you might sell some of those watches there.”

“I dare say. I will take it in my round. Well, good morning, miss. And my best congratulations to that happy young man.”

His own superior watch, as well as his healthy appetite, told Nathan that it was time for luncheon. He went to the nearest hotel to feed and meditate. He was also unable to resist the temptation to torture his brother-in-law by the following telegram: “The article wanted has changed hands and disappeared.” Besides, it was just possible that Ezra might in his frenzy be driven to increase his offer of two thousand five hundred pounds.

After luncheon he lit his cigar, inquired the way to Frelingham, and walked thither at a leisurely pace. He arrived at the back door precisely as Hilda Derriford passed out at the front door, joining Mr. Nathaniel Brookes, who was about to take her for a walk. Mr. Brookes assured himself of the presence in his ticket-pocket of a small brass wedding-ring, of the cracker variety, value one halfpenny. Peter was safely chained otherwise, since he disliked ex-

## The One Before

tremely the appearance of Mr. Nathan Rosenstein, he might have come out once more as the saviour of the Sahib-i-dirina. But he would have wasted his



trouble, for Rosenstein sold no watches, got no information, and left in a wickedly bad temper, while Mr. Brookes (with that brass ring in his ticket-pocket) was pursuing his designs on the ring at some distance from the house.

## The One Before

Hilda had spent a wretched night, had been gloomy and depressed at breakfast, and had received Mr. Brookes's congratulations with a faint smile and no enthusiasm. And at this Mr. Brookes would have been greatly surprised—for he had long guessed correctly the real state of affairs—if he had not noticed a certain ring on her finger. Hilda had taken no one into her confidence; she felt that she had made a mistake, and she was heartily ashamed of it. She ought to have known her own mind, and it had seemed to her yesterday that she knew it definitely and beyond the possibility of a doubt. She felt equally sure now that she had been wrong then. She could not marry Jimmy; she could not marry anybody. Marriage was a surrender of one's independence—it was a generally-accepted slavery with which she could not possibly have anything to do. And yet she was very fond of Jimmy. The break must be made gradually—during the time that she was in London, and sitting for her portrait, that could be arranged. But how much she wished that she could speak of it—that she could take counsel with somebody! To confess her own imbecility of mind to her own nearest relations was impossible—an imbecility that involved cruelty, as it were.

Mr. Nathaniel Brookes had known her as a child. He was sympathetic to her. Also, he was a man of

## The One Before

the world, and she had never known him to be in the least surprised. In her interests—as well as in the interests of his favourite nephew—he would counsel her well. Could she bring herself to speak of it?



They lingered on the bridge over the river, a mile away. Mr. Brookes leaned over the parapet, and discussed cheerfully the advantages of drowning over other methods of suicide. Suddenly he broke off.

“What was that ring that you were wearing this morning? Surely it was the same that Jimmy sent to our esteemed friend, Ernest Saunders.”

## The One Before

"It was. Mary was wearing it, and she lent it to me because it came from Jimmy—until—well—I suppose——"

"Really, how very unlucky to wear a ring that Jimmy sent to somebody else! What made me speak of it was that Jimmy thought the inscription on it was Oriental—wanted me to have a look at it; but I happened to be away at the time, and somehow I didn't."

(Oh, Mr. Brookes! And what of the sacred character of truth?)

He gazed pensively at the floating weeds and running water as if he had finished with the subject.

"Oh, but you can look at it now if you like," said Hilda, drawing off her glove. "See—there it is."

She handed it to Mr. Brookes, who turned it over critically in his fingers. "Dear me!" he said, "this is very curious."

"Mind you don't——" Hilda began. But before she could finish her warning to him not to drop it, the time for the warning had gone past. A sudden catch with the hand—a flash in the air—a little splash in the water—and under her very eyes the ring had gone.

But what her eyes did not detect was that the ring which Mr. Brookes had dropped into the water was not the ring which she had handed to him. It

## The One Before

was, in fact, as the intelligent reader has already surmised, not "The One Before," but the brass ring from his ticket-pocket.

"Oh, what have you done?" exclaimed Hilda;



THE RING  
HAD GONE

"and what shall I say to Mary? Can't we get it back?" She leaned over the parapet, looking in vain into the weedy bed of the river.

## The One Before

"I'm afraid there's not a chance of it. It's all my fault—my appalling clumsiness. I will explain and apologize to Mary as best I can this afternoon; but there's no hope of recovering her ring, I fear."

Hilda's back being turned to him as he spoke, he examined leisurely "The One Before," as it lay in the palm of his hand. He smiled a sweet smile of satisfaction, and slipped his prize into his pocket.

Hilda turned away from the parapet. "It's no good," she said. "I can't see the slightest trace of it." She sighed deeply.

It may have been a sigh of regret for the loss of the ring, or it may have been a sigh of relief. For quite suddenly the cloud that had come over her the evening before, and had rested on her ever since, passed away; her great happiness came back to her; she was deep in love again, and her will was her lover's will, and she did not want any beautiful independence in the least bit. Mr. Nathaniel Brookes watched her as she still spoke of the ring, threatening him with a variety of nursery punishments, and radiant with smiles. At the back of her mind she was wondering if it could be true, as he had said, that it was unlucky to wear a ring that your lover had given to some other person.

Mr. Nathaniel Brookes was quite reassured, even

## The One Before



before Hilda said suddenly, rather as if it were a grievance—

“You knew Jimmy long before I did.”

“Well, yes; it’s not my fault entirely.”

“Then, tell me everything about him, please. What was he like?”

“Like? Oh, the ordinary sort of boy.”

“What a wicked thing to say!” said Hilda, with conviction. “No, I want to know the real truth. And—I wanted to ask you—do you believe in palmists?”

HELD · CONVERSATION ·  
TOGETHER ·



## CHAPTER XXIV

SOME weeks later, Mr. Ezra Carcow and Mr. Nathan Rosenstein held conversation together. The last part of it may be reported.

"Then it comes to this," said Nathan, his face flushed and his manner excited. "I give weeks of my time and my work. The ring has gone—because you played the fool and frightened the woman

## The One Before

—and I find out where it has gone. You could not have done it; but I did it. I have to spend money like water, and give away valuable watches to servants to make them talk. I get bitten by a beast of a dog. I go on still, and find the ring has been dropped in the river, and I find the exact place where it was dropped. I pay two men—all this out of my own pocket—to search the bed of the river for me. It was not my fault that it failed; there was not one more thing that any man could have done. If I had got the ring you would have had half the profit. Therefore, if I fail, you should pay half the loss. Let us be reasonable, Ezra.”

Ezra sipped his absinthe complacently. “You know what I think of you, my dear Nathan, for I have told you sometimes. You tried to rob me of two thousand five hundred pounds, and because you were too much a fool to be able to do it, you want me to pay you some of my hard-earned money for a consolation. That is like you. You are a swine, and the son of a swine. You are a dirty thief. And I pay you nothing.”

That, undoubtedly, is not the way in which one speaks to one's brother-in-law. And with impartial justice it must be admitted that when Nathan flung the tumbler of absinthe into his brother's face, broke a chair to bits, and flung the bits into the grate,

## The One Before

cursing at the top of his voice in three different languages simultaneously, he went beyond the limits



of the retort courteous. His sister Rebecca, entering upon this scene of violence, was probably correct in going instantly into hysterics, and in subsequently charging her brother for the breakages. Also, a casual customer, who had sauntered into the shop below and heard the row, only acted naturally in leaving at once without waiting to complete his purchase.

It is also necessary to record a few observations made about the same time in the servants' hall at The Chestnuts, Shalton, Surrey.

"It may be only my fancy," said Ellen, surnamed

## The One Before

Maudie, "but to my mind she's gone back to just what she used to be. She humours him the same as she used. And if I makes an excuse for anything she listens to it just as she used."

"But he ain't gone back to what he used to be," said Jane, pensively. "For which my humble and hearty thanks. Remember, how he was always messing about, with his gummed labels, and his gas-out-please, and all the rest of the half-farthing business?"



I'd no patience. Nowadays, we never see him—for when it's not golf it's the garden."

"Quite right too. If I had my way, I'd never allow any man in my house at all. They're not wanted there."

## The One Before

"Now, that," said Mrs. Dawes, judiciously, "is what I call going too far."

"And Mr. 'Icks wearing himself to a shadow," added Jane, by way of further reproach.

"Wearing himself to your grandmother! Engaging himself to the coachman's daughter; that's what



he's doing. And if she wants such rubbish, I'm sure she's welcome. Oh, I say, have you seen Mrs. Barley's new ring?"

"Yes. That with them blue stones—what do they call them?—it's in the Bible, I know, along of Ananias. Well, it don't matter. That came from Mr. Brookes, I heard. Wonder what he give it her for?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," said Maudie, sardonically. "If you'll kindly touch the bell, I'll inquire of Mrs. Barley."

The two Miss Derrifords were married on the same day. Jane was unusually sentimental, and Ellen was unduly caustic on the subject; but it was a great

## The One Before

day at Shalton. During the latter part of their honeymoon, Hilda and Jimmy wandered by the lake one beautiful evening, and said how different their love was to any that had ever existed in the world—finer, deeper, grander. There was a pause, and Jimmy saw with awe and terror that tears came into Hilda's eyes, and he asked his princess-angel-dove to tell him what was the matter, adding that he would much rather have his heart cut out than that she should have one sad thought.

"It's nothing, heavenliest one. Only—there was a time when I almost very nearly didn't love you as much as I ought. It was when I was wearing that ring you sent to Mary—and Mr. Brookes said it was unlucky—and he dropped it in the river—and oh, how horrible it was of me, my own star-gem!"

To which Mr. James Havern replied that she was a dear white soul, without one fleck upon her; also that the best man on earth had never done enough to deserve one millionth part of the ecstasy of being loved by her. She was never in all her life to have one moment's unhappiness. He added that possibly the ring really was unlucky.

At his last remark she looked at him somewhat inquisitively.

"Dearest fairy-giant, I believe you know something about that ring."

## The One Before

In reply Mr. James Havern said that it was not his own secret, and suggested that his dearest and loveliest moon-nymph had better ask Mr. Brookes herself.



And there came a day when Mrs. Havern did ask. Mr. Brookes rubbed his forehead.

“Yes, my dear Hilda, there was a certain something about that ring, most extraordinary. I have the best memory in the world, and ultimately nothing escapes it. But for the moment my memory is not

## The One Before

acting, and I can recall nothing whatever about that ring."

It was on this same day that Mr. Rosenstein and Mr. Johnson met in the reading-room of their club,



and each came away with the firm and satisfying conviction that he had cut the other.

Mr. Brookes has decided to have his book of travels printed for private circulation only; this gives him more latitude—of which neither you, nor I, nor Mr. Johnson could possibly approve.

"The One Before" still lies forgotten in Mr. Brookes's safe. Jimmy's portrait of his wife was universally admired. Mr. Ernest Saunders Barley is the proud winner of a silver cup. Peter, that excellent bull-dog, is dead. And the story is ended.

**THE END**





